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**TWENTY SHORT PLAYS
ON A
ROYALTY HOLIDAY**

VOLUME III

TWENTY SHORT PLAYS
ON A
ROYALTY HOLIDAY

VOLUME III
(1947 to 1950)

*These plays are offered royalty-free
to amateurs until July 1st, 1950*

EDITED BY
MARGARET MAYORGA



SAMUEL FRENCH

New York

Toronto

Los Angeles

1947

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY THE VAIL-BALLOU PRESS, INC., BINGHAMTON, N. Y.

FOREWORD

When the series of **SHORT PLAYS ON A ROYALTY HOLIDAY** was originally projected, our purpose was to bring new writers to the attention of play-producing groups. During the last few years, however, most of the young writers have been at war. This volume, therefore, includes works by many well-known playwrights, which we are happy to offer here for the first time. To these authors and to all who have patiently waited for the emergence of their plays through the vicissitudes of war-time publication problems, our gratitude extends.

MARGARET MAYORGA

TERMS OF PRODUCTION

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THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

By

ROBERT FINCH & BETTY SMITH

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CAST

DAVID

LEAH

JOSEPH

RUTH

THE STRANGER

TIME. The present. Nearly midnight of an evening at the end of summer.

PLACE. A dock landing in Brooklyn.

THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

A pier's end with sea-whitened piles. A worn life saver with faded lettering, "S.S. Paradise" hangs from a nail. A rusted anchor and a tired coil of rope keep it company. There are two lanterns at either end of the pier; one red, one green. It is a dock landing in Brooklyn.

It is one of the last evenings of summer. There is a chill in the air, and a fugitive sea wind moves the lanterns from time to time. Across the water may be seen the twisting blinking lights of a bridge and the slow-wheeling lights of a ferris wheel in some obscure amusement park.

As the curtain rises, there is the mournful throb of a distant boat whistle, and the strains of an orchestra playing in a ship going out to sea.

David comes hurrying on. He is a disappointed passenger for the departed boat. He is a gentle, slender man in well-worn clothes, and with his coat collar turned up against the wind. He sets down a battered suitcase and speaks sadly as he looks out to sea, where the boat is disappearing in the darkness.

DAVID. Gone! (Gazes back in the direction from which he came; then looks out to sea again.) Well . . .

[He leans dejectedly against one of the piles. He is startled when he hears a little girl's voice.]

LEAH. Papa! Papa! (She runs in, a twelve-year old with long braids, a short skirt and sailor blouse. She carries a little straw suitcase. Usually she is a serious child. But now she's excited.) Oh, Papa! It's gone! The boat's gone.

DAVID. You shouldn't have come out, Leah. It's chilly. I didn't even want you to know I was going. Why did you follow me?

THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

LEAH. But look at the boat, Papa.

DAVID (*nods*). Yes. There she goes. All her lights strung out like on a Christmas tree.

LEAH (*her head to one side*). I can hear the music.

DAVID (*sadly*). And the orchestra plays all the way across.

LEAH. Holler! Maybe the boat will turn back.

DAVID. No, Leah. No boat would turn back for me. (*Sighs.*) I felt I was going to be too late.

LEAH (*stricken*). Oh! I forgot! (*Calls.*) Hurry up, Joseph.

DAVID. Did you bring Brother, too?

LEAH. Yes, only he couldn't keep up with me. And now he's afraid that you're going to scold him.

DAVID. You both ought to be home in bed, but . . . (*Calls in a resigned tone.*) Well come along, son, now that you're here.

JOSEPH (*as he comes on panting*). She wouldn't wait for me. (*He's a little fellow of eight, wearing knickerbockers, sneakers and a sailor blouse, and a sailor hat on the back of his head. His shirt-tail hangs out, and he carries a little suitcase which bangs against his knees as he carries it with two hands. He is disillusioned.*) Aw, phooey! I *knew* we were going to miss it.

LEAH (*pointing*). See it, Brother? See it? There goes the boat. Like a merry-go-round. Only more lights.

DAVID (*trying to be stern*). Children, why did you follow me?

LEAH (*avoiding the issue*). Look at the lights shine on the water! They wiggle and they make a road clear to the boat.

DAVID (*still trying to be stern*). What are you doing here, children?

LEAH. We thought you were going somewheres and we didn't want to be left. So we packed our suitcases and then made out like we went to bed. But we just sat in

THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

the dark and listened when you went. Then we followed you.

JOSEPH. Leah's got the pajamas. But I got *lunch* in my suitcase.

DAVID (*worried*). You didn't wake up Mama?

LEAH. No-o-o. It seemed like you didn't want her to know.

[*She is puzzled, but the father gives no explanation.*]

JOSEPH. I wanted to ride on the boat with you. And now we went and missed it!

[*Disgusted, he drops suitcase to the ground, and kicks it.*]

LEAH. Joseph! Don't kick the lunch!

DAVID. At least we saw the boat, anyway. (*Looking out over the water.*) It's beautiful, isn't it?

LEAH. It sure is, Papa. (*Breathing the name.*) The "Paradise." That's its name.

DAVID (*nodding*). "The S. S. Paradise."

JOSEPH (*agonized*). Ain't there *another* boat?

LEAH. No, there ain't. Not till this one comes back at three A. M. in the morning.

DAVID (*patiently*). Don't say "ain't."

JOSEPH. Aw, *Papa!* It don't matter what we say when we missed the boat. And after all the trouble we had sneaking out of the house, too.

LEAH (*troubled*). What'll we do now, Papa?

DAVID. I'm going to stay and wait for the boat. You and Brother will have to go right back home and go to bed.

JOSEPH (*wailing*). Aw . . . !

LEAH. Can't we wait and go on the boat with you, please, Papa?

DAVID. No!

JOSEPH. Why?

DAVID. Because I'm going a long ways away. (*Joseph wails louder.*) Hush, son.

LEAH. But if we go home now, we might wake up Mama.

THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

And if she asks, we'll have to tell her where you are.
DAVID. That's right. Well — look here, children. If I let you stay awhile, will you promise to go right home when the boat comes?

LEAH. You're *sure* we can't go with you?

DAVID. No, Leah. You can't.

LEAH. We'll stay then, just till the boat comes in.

JOSEPH. Oh, boy! Stay out all night! Pretty near all night, anyhow.

[But already he yawns loudly.]

LEAH *(laughing at him)*. He's sleepy already, and it ain't midnight yet.

JOSEPH *(valiantly pulling himself together)*. I am not sleepy. I'm just hungry. *(He opens his suitcase.)* And I'm gonna eat now.

[He takes out a misshapen sandwich and munches on it.]

LEAH. Mama was saving that meat for tomorrow. There wasn't much of it, either.

JOSEPH *(at first conscience-stricken, then reconciled)*. Well, I can't put it back. I already licked on it.

LEAH. Put it back for dinner tomorrow.

JOSEPH *(puts it back into suitcase; something else catches his eye)*. I brought fishing tackle too, Papa. Can I fish? Can I?

DAVID. If you want to. Here! Give me a piece of that meat. I'll bait the hook for you. *(He does so. Joseph takes the line, which is rolled on a stick, and throws the hook into the water and watches it wide-eyed.)* Do you like it here, children?

LEAH. I like it because I've never been out so late before. *(Peers after the receding boat.)* The boat's almost out of sight now.

DAVID. Away out on the sea where I'd be now, if . . .

LEAH. And now you can't hear the music anymore.

[It is remarkably still all at once.]

JOSEPH *(pulling in the line)*. I guess the fish is all sleeping.

LEAH. I bet Mama's mad.

THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

DAVID. I don't think she knows. (*Looks back at the house on the hill.*) There's no light. House is all dark. She must be asleep.

JOSEPH. Poor Mama!

DAVID. Now, son. (*Joseph sniffs.*) What's the trouble?

JOSEPH (*nearly sobbing*). Lonesome.

DAVID. I told you not to follow me.

JOSEPH (*afraid of being sent back*). I don't mean lonesome. (*Finding an excuse.*) I just don't like the water. It sounds funny sloppin' round down there — like it's deep.

LEAH. Sure it's deep. But we're not in it. We're up here.

JOSEPH (*feebly*). But it never was black when I was here before.

LEAH (*shivers suddenly*). I'm cold.

DAVID (*taking off his coat*). Sit close to Brother and I'll put my coat around you both.

[*They sit close together in the shadows. He puts his coat about them.*]

JOSEPH. I'm scared. Seems like there was something comin' over the water that I can't see — and I'm scared.

DAVID. You're just tired. Lie down with Sister, close together, and keep each other warm.

LEAH. If we fall asleep, will you wake us when the boat comes?

DAVID. Yes. Go to sleep now.

[*Joseph yawns and lies down.*]

LEAH. When I play the music box — just once.

[*She takes a tiny battered music box from her suitcase. She turns the catch and it tinkles out a tiny childish tune, which sounds mysterious in the night.*]

DAVID. Sleep now.

[*The song tinkles on to the end. The children go to sleep.*]

STRANGER. Evening.

[*He appears without a sound, at the top of the pier,*

THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

seeming to rise out of the sea. He is hatless, and wears a seaman's jacket and boots. His hair is somewhat long and he is unshaven.

DAVID (*starts in alarm*). Where did you come from?

STRANGER (*with a kindly smile*). From the water.

DAVID. But you're not wet.

STRANGER. No.

DAVID. Oh! You came in a rowboat. Of course. (*A bit frightened.*) But I didn't hear any oars.

STRANGER. Very few people hear me come.

DAVID (*glancing at him sharply*). What did you say?

STRANGER. Perhaps you were listening to the music.

[*He indicates the music box, which has now run down.*]

DAVID. It's a present I gave her when she was very small. She plays it every night before she goes to sleep.

STRANGER. Yes.

DAVID. It's long past their bedtime. We're waiting for the three o'clock boat.

STRANGER. Children going with you?

DAVID. Where I go, I go alone.

STRANGER. You are making a mistake, Levine.

DAVID (*starts*). You know my name?

STRANGER. I know your name.

DAVID. Oh! You work for the boat company.

STRANGER. In a way.

DAVID. I didn't sign anything when I bought my ticket for the boat this morning. (*Enlightened.*) But I guess the ticket seller knew me.

STRANGER. Perhaps. (*He leans on a post and looks out to sea.*) I wish — I wish you'd change your mind about this trip, Levine.

DAVID. I wouldn't change my mind now. (*Vehemently.*) I should say not. (*Suddenly facing the Stranger.*) Why shouldn't I go? (*Bitterly.*) That is one of the few rights still left to me.

STRANGER. That's true, in a way.

DAVID. Well?

THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

STRANGER (*calmly*). It's just that everything is so unsettled these days. A man ought to be mighty clear in his mind before he goes on a trip. (*Slowly.*) Especially such a long one.

DAVID. You don't know . . .

STRANGER (*puts out his hand and David stops talking*). And it's getting cold too. The wrong time to start out, seems like. (*Silence, as both gaze out to sea.*) Yet the lights look sort of pretty on the other side, don't they?

DAVID. Beautiful! (*He speaks more intimately.*) Seems like I been looking at them all my life — the merry-go-round and the ferris wheel over there. Sometimes you can hear the music from them when the wind is right.

STRANGER. Listen!

[*He holds up his left hand, palm outward towards the sea. Music fades in as from a distance and is clearly heard.*

DAVID (*pleased*). Yes. I hear it now. (*The Stranger lowers his hand and the music fades away. Now David seems more friendly to the Stranger.*) You know, every night when I lock up the house and start up to bed, I always stop a minute and look out of the upstairs window at the lights on the other side, and listen for the music. Our house is quite high up, and sometimes the music seems to come clearer there.

STRANGER (*nodding back over his shoulder*). That's your house. The white one on the hill.

DAVID (*astonished*). Why, yes!

[*Looks closely at the Stranger.*

STRANGER. It's a very neat place.

DAVID. Ruth, my wife, loves it and keeps it spotless.

STRANGER. There's a nice yard for the children to play in.

DAVID. Only there's not much room. It's full of flowers; mostly chrysanthemums now. It's getting into fall.

STRANGER. It must be a good life: a wife, children, your home, flowers . . .

DAVID. No, it isn't good. It isn't good because the world isn't good. The landlord says we can stay in the house

THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

but two weeks longer. My wife cries in secret. Even the flowers, they are not ours.

STRANGER. You planted them and tended them.

DAVID. To sell on the streets, from house to house, for a few pennies.

STRANGER. Even so.

DAVID. But summer's gone now and the flowers died with the first frost last night. Winter's coming on and there won't be enough for the five of us. There's a baby at home, you know.

STRANGER. There will be other work.

DAVID. Not for me. I'm a machinist — was a machinist. I did good work, earned good money and then — things changed. I'm not American.

STRANGER. So you are getting out of it.

DAVID (*passionately*). What else can I do?

STRANGER. You can endure and hope — and live, Levine.

DAVID. You do not understand. (*Simply.*) I am a Jew.

STRANGER. You are a Jew.

DAVID. I always tried to live right. I worked hard, was accepted at my worth. And then the world caught on fire.

STRANGER (*sighs heart-brokenly*). I know.

DAVID. I got letters from those who knew my folks in the old country. They suffered persecutions, humiliations, concentration camps — and then death.

STRANGER. Old injustices, since the world began.

DAVID. It was all right here at first. Then things changed. No Jews wanted. One man told me if I'd change my name . . . But I wouldn't.

STRANGER. It's a good name, Levine.

DAVID. It's a thousand years old. But it's against me in these times.

STRANGER. So you were going out on that boat and never coming back.

DAVID (*in a whisper*). Yes. There is no other way out.

THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

Our landlord tells me I have to move by the first. He speaks of real estate values.

STRANGER. And Ruth?

DAVID. My wife is not Jewish. After I go, there will be a little insurance. She can give the children her father's name and start life new somewhere else.

STRANGER. When Ruth took you, she took your people. She would not want you to leave her. Your people are her people and your God, her God.

DAVID. But you do not know what it is to be persecuted.

STRANGER. I know. I too, am a Jew.

DAVID. You? (*Stranger nods.*) But not a workman?

STRANGER. I used to be a carpenter.

DAVID. You were persecuted by the Gentiles?

STRANGER. By the Gentiles and Jews both. (*Sadly.*) And I did not *want* to die.

DAVID (*sits down and buries his face in his hands*). I don't want to die. But I don't know how to live in this world.

STRANGER. Levine, remember who you are. You come of an old people; a people who will endure until the ending of all recorded time.

DAVID. In spite of terrors and persecutions?

STRANGER. In spite of tortures and crucifixions.

DAVID. I don't know . . . I don't know.

STRANGER. Lift up your heart, Levine. Remember that the first Christian was a Jew. According to the Gentile faith, God chose a Hebrew Child to be His Son on earth.

DAVID. What must I do? What must I do?

STRANGER (*in a tone of authority*). Levine! (*David gets to his feet and fastens his eye on the Stranger's face.*) You must not die now. You must live . . .

DAVID. Live to endure the things . . .

STRANGER. Live until you die — or as it may be, until you are put to death. It may be that you will be destined to die for your faith. When that time comes, you must die with faith and courage, so that your people will live

THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

and be brave enough to endure. So dying, you will come to something. This way, no.

DAVID. But my wife . . . Sometimes I think Ruth looks at me accusingly, as though marrying me had set her apart from others.

STRANGER. Even now she weeps in her sleep, dreaming that you are leaving her. (*Pause.*) Look!

[*They look towards the house. The Stranger raises his left hand.*]

DAVID. Why, the lights are coming on in my house!

STRANGER. Your wife is leaving her bed and is coming to take you home.

DAVID (*stares a long time at his house, then turns slowly and speaks fearfully*). Who — are you?

STRANGER. Levine . . . ?

[*He shows his hands to David, holding the palms out.*]

DAVID (*stares at his hands. Then his eyes go to the Stranger's face. His voice is a tense whisper*). No! (*He backs away, his eyes on the Stranger's face. His whisper is louder.*) No!!

STRANGER (*holds up his left hand in gentle command. David stands still*). Remember me.

[*He backs into the shadows and is gone.*]

DAVID (*stands awed, then speaks quickly*). Leah, wake up!

LEAH. I wasn't asleep, Papa.

DAVID. Then you saw him?

LEAH. Who?

DAVID. The man who was here.

LEAH. I didn't see anybody.

JOSEPH (*wakes up, rubbing his eyes*). Has the boat come yet, Papa?

DAVID. No, son.

JOSEPH. Will it come soon?

DAVID. We're going home.

JOSEPH. You're not going away on the boat?

DAVID. Not now, son.

RUTH (*hurries in. She looks frightened. She wears a*

THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

long coat over her nightgown. She gives an exclamation of relief when she sees her husband). David!

DAVID. How did you know I was here, Ruth?

LEAH. Mama!

[Runs and takes her hand. Joseph clings to the other hand.]

RUTH. Oh, David, I had a dream. I dreamed you were leaving us, and I cried in my sleep. Then I awoke and knew just where to come.

JOSEPH. The boat went away.

DAVID. I spoke with a stranger . . .

LEAH (*patiently*). There was no one, Papa.

DAVID. He just left — in a boat.

RUTH (*looking out over the water*). There is no boat on the water, David.

DAVID. I thought . . .

[He passes his hand over his eyes.]

RUTH. Oh, David, why did you go through it alone? I knew what they were doing to you. Why didn't you tell me?

DAVID. I never knew you suspected. I didn't want you to be hurt, too.

RUTH. I'm your wife. I have a right to share your troubles.

DAVID. Oh, Ruth . . .

RUTH. We can go somewhere else. This is a big free country. There's a place for us — somewhere — in it. We'll find a bit of land where we'll build a home of our own — somehow. It's a good country, David. Things will never happen here that happen in other parts of the world. Take heart, David.

DAVID (*as if to himself*). He knew. Because he was persecuted too.

RUTH. You've had a dream. Come home with us now.

JOSEPH. I'm so sleepy.

[Yawns.]

DAVID. Yes, we'll go home now.

THE FAR-DISTANT SHORE

[He picks up the boy. Ruth and Leah each take a suitcase and start to go. David lingers alone, holding his son and looking out over the water.]

RUTH (*calling from off stage*). Come, David, beloved.

[David straightens himself up and, carrying his now sleeping son, follows his wife. He holds his head high with new courage.]

Curtain

BOOK-LOVERS
By
JOHN KIRKPATRICK

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CAST

MISS SCOTT

JOHNNY MACRAE

NED PROUTY

CARRIE WINSTON

ESTHER MAE HENDERSON

MISS ABERCROMBIE

TIME. Afternoon.

PLACE. The main room of the Library in a small town.

BOOK-LOVERS

The time is afternoon, and sunlight streams through the window of the library.

The set is very simple. In the left wall, well upstage, is a door that leads to a vestibule and thence outside. This door has its hinges upstage and opens in. In the right wall is an archway that opens into another reading room. In the upstage wall, right center, is a rather wide window, furnished with curtains.

Right center is a round table with four chairs drawn up around it. At left is the librarian's desk, which faces right. There is an armchair behind it, and another one to the right of desk that faces down left. There is another armchair at left of window, that faces downstage.

There are bookshelves — or bookcases, if preferred — at right and left of window, on both sides of archway, and behind desk. There is also a bookcase about three feet wide and about four feet high which is placed against the upstage wall at left center, and at right angles to the wall, thus projecting out into the room. This serves to form a kind of alcove in the corner by the door and, incidentally, masks from the view of anyone entering the door the area of the room near the window and the person occupying the armchair which is beside the window.

On the desk are some books, some card-files, and a telephone. There are more card-files on top of the bookcase behind the desk.

There is a rug on the floor, appropriate pictures on the wall, and some vases of flowers placed here and there on the tops of the shelves.

Miss Henrietta Scott is seated behind the desk, going through a card-file, occasionally withdrawing a card, marking it with a pencil and adding it to a pile on the desk.

BOOK-LOVERS

Miss Scott is 30, somewhat large and plump but rather attractive. She has a shrewd, wise look about her, and something of a twinkle in her eyes. She is really an extraordinarily good-natured woman, although she pretends to be caustic and cynical. Soon the door opens and Johnny MacRae comes in, removing his cap and glancing about him uncertainly. Johnny is a boy of 17, fairly tall, with a frank, honest face and a great deal of charm. His clothes are good but could do with a pressing; his shoes need a shine, and it's been all day since his tow head had any contact with a comb and brush. He carries two ragged school-books tied together with a piece of disreputable-looking string. At the moment he seems a bit shy, but Johnny, as we shall see later, is something of an "actor," and it is rather difficult to tell how much of his diffidence is real and how much is put on for effect. Obviously he is one of those people who, in a thoroughly disarming way, are accustomed to getting what they want, but as Miss Scott looks him over coldly one might suspect that, for once, he has met his match.

JOHNNY (*comes to desk*). Er — I want a book.

MISS SCOTT. Well, quite a stranger, aren't you?

JOHNNY. Ma'am?

MISS SCOTT. Remember the last time you were in here?

JOHNNY. No, ma'am.

[*But he does.*]

MISS SCOTT. Well, I do. You knocked a baseball through that window there; it hit this desk, bounced, and took the nose off a bust of George Washington. Remember?

JOHNNY. I — I don't believe I do. You see I used to play a awful lot o' ball.

MISS SCOTT. Hmm. Well, that was the *last* time you played in *this* neighborhood! Then, five minutes later you had the nerve to come in here and ask for the baseball. *Now*, do you remember?

BOOK-LOVERS

JOHNNY (*manages a feeble grin*). I — er — sorter b'lieve I do. I guess I was just a kid then. I — I'm sorry.

MISS SCOTT. Oh, no hard feelings. I wrote to your father about it . . .

JOHNNY. I remember *that* part of it!

MISS SCOTT. I thought you would. He sent me a check to pay for the window, so that's that.

JOHNNY. What about the bust?

MISS SCOTT. Oh, I found an old one of Shakespeare that was cracked. I took the nose off the "Bard of Avon" and glued it on the "Father of His Country." It looks a little *peculiar* but . . . Now, what can I do for you?

JOHNNY. Er — I want a book.

MISS SCOTT. I see. What kind of a book?

JOHNNY. A — a thin book.

MISS SCOTT. Oh, a "thin" book?

JOHNNY. Yes'm. I don't want to be too long at it.

MISS SCOTT. But what kind of a book?

JOHNNY. Ooooooh, just a book. I want to read it.

MISS SCOTT. Hm. I rather gathered that. But what kind of book would you like to read?

JOHNNY. I don't care. Just so long as it'll ease my mind.

MISS SCOTT. I see. I don't suppose you want a school-book?

JOHNNY. No, ma'am. I got plenty o' them right here.

MISS SCOTT. Well, would you like a novel? Biography? Adventure story?

JOHNNY. I don't care. Just something to . . .

MISS SCOTT. To "ease your mind," eh? Well, of course, if I knew what was *on* your mind, I'd know better how to "ease" it. (*A shot in the dark.*) Maybe you'd like a love-story?

JOHNNY. No — NO! I mean, no, ma'am!

MISS SCOTT (*wisely*). Oh, I see. Now I do know.

JOHNNY. Know what?

MISS SCOTT (*discreetly*). Nothing — nothing. Well, let's look over the recent returns. (*She turns in her*

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chair to the bookshelf behind her.) Let's see now. (*Reading the titles and then cutting her eyes around to see the effect on him.*) Ummmmm. "The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew." Guess you're too old for that . . .

JOHNNY. Well, I hope so.

MISS SCOTT. Ummmm. "Porcelain: Its Art and Manufacture." (*Johnny makes a wry face.*) "Life Begins at Forty" —

JOHNNY. Maybe — maybe I'd better come back some other time.

MISS SCOTT (*suppressing a smile*). Oh, here's something. "The Cruise of the Schooner 'Jasper.'"

[*She takes the book out and hands it to him.*]

JOHNNY (*reaching for it*). Something to do with a boat?

MISS SCOTT. Guessed it right off. It's quite thrilling. I read it.

JOHNNY (*examining it*). There ain't any — there aren't any — I mean they're all *men* in here, aren't they?

MISS SCOTT. Not a woman in the crew. Not even the cook.

JOHNNY. Oh.

MISS SCOTT. Of course there was the captain's wife, but she was washed overboard the second day out.

JOHNNY. Good. I mean, I'll take it. (*A slight pause.*) Er — what do I do with it?

MISS SCOTT. "Do" with it? Why, I thought you wanted to read it.

JOHNNY. Oh, I do. But I mean what — er — where . . .

MISS SCOTT (*fingering file*). Let's see. Have you a card? You used to have one in the Primary. . . .

JOHNNY. Oh, I don't want to take it home. Can't I just sort of sit here?

MISS SCOTT. Why, of course, but . . .

JOHNNY. See, I want to get away from everybody. That's why I came to the liberry.

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MISS SCOTT. Oh. Strange. I thought you came for a book. That's why most people come.

JOHNNY. Oh, well, I figgered as long as I'm here I might as well be doin' something to kill time. (*Looking around.*) Which way — what department — where is the smoking-room?

MISS SCOTT. The "smoking-room"? You don't mean to tell me *you* smoke?

JOHNNY. Oh, no, ma'am.

MISS SCOTT. Libraries don't have "smoking-rooms." You ought to come around oftener and get acquainted. What on earth do you want the smoking-room for?

JOHNNY. Well, I figgered in the smoking-room there wouldn't be any — you know. I mean it would just be for *men*.

MISS SCOTT. My! You have got it bad, haven't you? Well, of course, this isn't the Elks Club, so I can't very well lock the door to keep out all women. But you just have a seat over there somewhere, and I'll do my best to see that you're not annoyed by any "you knows."

JOHNNY. Thank you, ma'am.

[*He starts right.*]

MISS SCOTT. Wait a minute — wait a minute! Haven't you forgotten something? (*Johnny stops.*) I'm a "you know"!

JOHNNY. Oh, you don't count. I mean you're too — you're not — I mean . . .

MISS SCOTT (*trying not to smile*). Never mind. I know what you mean. Sit down. Read your book. (*Johnny sits in chair left of round table, opens book, decides he doesn't like the light, moves to chair above table, sits, finds chair uncomfortable, rises, looks around and finally moves to armchair by window. Seated here, he is out of sight of Miss Scott and masked from the view of anyone entering the front door. Miss Scott calls to him.*) If I remember correctly, the captain's wife gets drowned

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somewhere on page twenty-six. You'd better begin on page twenty-seven.

JOHNNY. Oh, I'd like to read about her when she's struggling in the water.

[Miss Scott smiles. The front door opens and Ned Prouty comes in. He is about Johnny's age but shorter, slimmer, and more wiry, with dark hair and a somewhat serious face. He looks about him nervously, advances to the desk, and with an air of mystery speaks in a voice that is something of a whisper.]

NED. I — er — I want a book.

[Johnny rises, looks over the top of the bookcase, sees who it is and sits down again.]

MISS SCOTT. Well, well, well! You want a book, eh?

NED (looks around again and speaks in even more of a whisper). Y-y-yes, please. A book.

MISS SCOTT (imitates his mysterious manner by looking behind her, pretending to look under desk, and finally whispering). You don't say so! Would you like a detective story?

NED (somewhat rattled). Ma'am? Oh, no, ma'am. I — the book I want is a — it's a book. It's a — a sort of especial kind of a sort of book. It's a — well, I don't know if you've got it because everybody wouldn't want to read it but I'd like it if you've got it — that is, if you've got it here now. But I can't come back. I've got to read it today. That is, if you've got it. H-have you?

MISS SCOTT. Well, of course, if I knew what book you wanted I could tell more about it.

NED. Thank you, ma'am.

[He starts towards right.]

MISS SCOTT. Wait! Wait! What's the name of it?

NED. It's — er — you mean I — I've got to tell you the name of it?

MISS SCOTT. Well, you can write it down on a piece of paper if you'd like. Though as long as I have ears and

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you have a *tongue* I don't see why you shouldn't say its name out loud.

NED. Oh, I — I couldn't do that! Couldn't I just sort of — well, couldn't I just prowl 'round till I find it?

MISS SCOTT. Oh, yes. Sure. We have about seven thousand volumes here and some of them get misplaced. But if you'd like to "prowl," why, "prowl away."

NED. Oh, gee. I — I couldn't do that. I haven't got time. Maybe — maybe I *had* better tell you the name of it.

MISS SCOTT. Well, that seems like a nice sensible thing to do.

NED (*going to right of desk*). But you won't tell anybody, will you?

MISS SCOTT. Look here, Ned Prouty! Is it some book you *ought not* to read? Because if it *is*, I won't give it to you! Do you understand?

NED (*very much embarrassed*). Oh, no, it — it isn't anything like that. It's just that I (*He looks around once more.*) I don't want anybody to know I asked for it. They might — they might — Oh, I can't explain but . . .

MISS SCOTT. All right — all right! Mum's the word. I guess librarians come under the same head as doctors, lawyers and priests. Shoot! What's the name of it?

NED. It's (*He gulps.*) it's "The Yearning Void in the Soul of Nora," by Sigrid Beejorksen Beejensen.

MISS SCOTT. WHAT?

NED. "The Yearning Void in the Soul of Nora," by — by — maybe I don't get the name just right. It's Scandinavian or Swedish or something — with a lot o' B's and J's comin' right on top of each other.

MISS SCOTT. Yes. The J's are like Y's. Sigrid Bjorken Bjensen.

NED. Oh, you know it? The way you said "what" just now, I didn't think you did.

MISS SCOTT. Hmph. The way I said "what" just now

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meant something else altogether. *What* in thunder do you want to read a book like that for?

NED. I — I've got to read it.

MISS SCOTT. You mean that new teacher at the high school gave it as required reading in the English Class?

NED (*quickly — too quickly*). Oh, no, no, ma'am. Miss Abercrombie hasn't got a thing to do with it. Not a thing! I — I don't know what made you think that because — well, she hasn't! Not a thing! Honestly!

MISS SCOTT. All right — all right. I'm sorry. Let's see. (*Turns in her chair.*) I think I have a copy. (*Reaching to shelf behind her.*) Yes, a lady brought it back yesterday. (*She reaches towards file.*) You have a card, haven't you?

NED. Oh, I don't want to take it home. I got to read it here this afternoon. Can I?

MISS SCOTT. Well, if you *can*, I'll wrap you and the book up together and send you along to Mr. Ripley. It's got eleven hundred pages.

NED. Oh. Well, I can find out what it's about, I guess.

MISS SCOTT. Maybe. The lady who brought it back yesterday had it *two weeks* and said *she* didn't find out what it was about but — here.

[*She hands it to him.*]

NED (*taking it*). Well, anyway, I'll glance through it so I'll be able to talk about it.

MISS SCOTT. You mean you've heard somebody else talk about it and now you want to do the same thing.

NED. Y-yes, ma'am. I — that is — yes, ma'am.

MISS SCOTT. Well, have a seat. And more power to you!

[*As he walks away she looks after him, a puzzled expression on her face. Ned, carrying his book, walks over and sits at right of the table. He has just opened the book when he glances up and sees Johnny grinning at him.*]

JOHNNY. Hi, Shrimp!

NED (*half-rising*). Oh. You here?

JOHNNY. Sure.

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NED. What are *you* doing here? I never saw you in the library before.

[*Miss Scott begins stacking some books on her desk.*]

JOHNNY. Oh, I get littererry every now an' then. Like to feed the old brain. What's that you got?

NED. Oh, a — just a book.

JOHNNY. Well, I didn't think it was a ice-cream cone.

(*Strolling down to table.*) What's the name of it?

NED. Oh, you — you wouldn't understand. It's Scandiwegian.

JOHNNY. It's *what*?

NED. I mean it's Swedish — or something.

JOHNNY. Oh, you read Swedish, do you?

NED. No, not exactly but . . .

JOHNNY. What's the "yearning soul in the void" or whatever it is?

NED. Oh, you — you eavesdropped! You overheard!

JOHNNY (*grinning*). Sure I did.

[*Miss Scott rises with stack of books.*]

NED. You didn't have any right to.

JOHNNY. Why not? This is a liberry, ain't it? Public place — jus' like a railroad station.

MISS SCOTT. Oh, no. Not like a railroad station.

JOHNNY. Ma'am?

MISS SCOTT (*pointedly*). In a railroad station people can *talk*. In a library they *can't*.

[*She goes out through archway. Johnny looks after her.*]

JOHNNY. That lady — I don't think she likes me.

NED. Why?

JOHNNY. Oh, we had a little argument once — 'bout a baseball. When they built this building, they put it too close to third base. Who's "Nora"?

NED. I don't know yet.

JOHNNY (*sits in chair above table*). Sounds like a girl.

What do you want to read about a girl for?

NED. All books have girls.

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JOHNNY. This one hasn't. (*Almost to himself.*) I'm through with girls.

NED. I — I don't think this is about a girl. I think it's about a woman.

JOHNNY. Well, what's the difference?

NED. A lot. Women'll keep quiet — listen to a fellow — understand him. Girls just rattle.

JOHNNY. Oh, so you got the gate too, did you?

NED. What do you mean?

JOHNNY. You know what I mean. It's Friday afternoon. Every Friday afternoon you take Carrie Winston to the Cut-Rate for a marshmallow hash. What's the matter?

NED. I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about.

JOHNNY. Oh, no?

NED. No. (*A slight pause.*) But as long as we're on the subject, it *is* Friday afternoon and every Friday, if I remember right, *you* take . . .

JOHNNY. Skip it.

NED. *You* take Esther Mae Henderson to the Cut-Rate for . . .

JOHNNY. Skip it, I said!

NED. And now . . .

JOHNNY. All right — all right. We're both in the dog-house. So what?

NED. Dog-house? *I'm* not in the . . .

JOHNNY. You're in the liberry. Same thing.

MISS SCOTT (*who has appeared in archway*). I'll have to ask you to be a little more careful, please.

JOHNNY (*turning quickly*). Ma'am?

MISS SCOTT. I'll have to ask you to show a little more respect for this institution. First you call it a railroad station, now it's a dog-house. Don't you like your book?

JOHNNY. Yes, ma'am.

MISS SCOTT (*pointing to chair by window*). Well, read it! (*Johnny returns to his seat.*) How are *you* making out?

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NED. I — I haven't got the hang of it yet somehow.

MISS SCOTT. Well, don't worry. You will. The first six hundred pages are the hardest. After that it begins to get a little interesting.

[She goes to desk.]

NED. Say, Miss Scott, did you read it?

MISS SCOTT. Oh, here and there.

NED (*rising*). Maybe — maybe you could tell me 'bout it, so I can — can . . .

MISS SCOTT. So you can talk about it, eh? Afraid I skipped too much for that. Why don't you talk about something else?

NED. Because she — I mean — that is . . .

[He becomes very much confused.]

MISS SCOTT (*again that puzzled expression*). Carrie Winston didn't read that, did she?

NED. Carrie? No. And if she did it wouldn't make any difference.

MISS SCOTT (*sitting*). Oh, I'm sorry.

NED (*coming to right of desk*). Carrie Winston is nothing to me. She's less than nothing. She . . .

[A girl comes in front door, talking over her shoulder to another girl.]

CARRIE. And he said, "I'm twenty-two," and I said, "I know just lots and lots of men who're twenty-two," and he said . . . (*She sees Ned and stops, snapping her mouth shut tight. Ned looks at her a few seconds, then marches with a great deal of dignity back to his place at right of table. The girl turns to Miss Scott, who has observed this.*) 'Lo, Miss Scott.

MISS SCOTT. Hello, Carrie. What can I do for you?

CARRIE. Nothing. I just came with . . .

[Meantime the other girl has come in.]

ESTHER MAE. Oh, hullo, Miss Scott.

[At the sound of her voice, Johnny rises quickly, looks over bookcase, then ducks, and buries himself in his chair again. Carrie Winston is small and blonde; Esther Mae

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Henderson is fairly tall and dark. They are about the same age, but it is apparent that quite recently they have decided to become "grown up" — or think they have. The suddenness of their decision has naturally made them somewhat self-conscious.

MISS SCOTT. Well, Esther Mae, what can I do for you?

ESTHER MAE (*putting a book on desk*). I brought this back. I didn't like it.

MISS SCOTT. Oh, I'm sorry. What was the matter with it?

ESTHER MAE. Oh, it's too — you know — it's just a story. It's got a regular plot n'action n'everything. I could understand every word of it.

MISS SCOTT. You wanted something you couldn't understand?

ESTHER MAE. Well . . . *you* know. This is awfully sort of "young," don't you think? I read nearly fifty pages and I didn't get shaken once.

MISS SCOTT. "Shaken?"

ESTHER MAE (*sitting in armchair right of desk*). Uh-huh. You know — shaken to my foundations. The book just went right ahead. It didn't "grope" or anything, so of course I didn't suffer.

MISS SCOTT (*hiding her amusement*). Oh, that's too bad. You want to suffer?

ESTHER MAE. Well . . . *you* know. It isn't so much I *want* to suffer. I think I *ought* to — at my age. I mean all of life's suffering, don't you think?

MISS SCOTT. Well, there're a few bright spots here and there.

CARRIE. That's why I stopped reading. I'd rather *live*. Life's so terrific, you just can't put it in a book. (*She has been looking for a place to sit down and now goes to chair at left side of reading-table, speaking rather coldly to Ned.*) Do you mind if I have this chair?

NED (*quite as coldly*). I'm not sitting in it.

CARRIE. I didn't say you were. (*She takes chair, drags*

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it a few feet towards left, turns it so that its back is towards Ned and sits.) Of course I think reading's all right for *young* people because they're not old enough to *live* and that's the only way they can find out about life, but I think when you start *living* then you ought to stop reading about life and just *live*.

ESTHER MAE. Oh, I don't think so. Do you, Miss Scott? I think reading about life helps you to live — if you know what I mean. Besides — goodness, you can't live *all* the time, it would wear you out. Don't you think so, Miss Scott?

MISS SCOTT. I'm sure I don't know *what* to think!

CARRIE (*to Esther Mae*). Well, get a book and let's go.

ESTHER MAE. Have you got another book, Miss Scott?

MISS SCOTT. Oh, yes — several thousands.

ESTHER MAE. I mean a book where the people in it don't do very much but sort of sit down and regret, and think about how they're frustrated.

MISS SCOTT. You mean "frustrated"?

ESTHER MAE (*nodding*). Uh-huh. *You* know. Where they don't get married in the end or where they *do* get married and it's too much for 'em. Or where they get married to the wrong people and sort of pine away with heart-trouble or tuberculosis or something. *You* know — like life!

MISS SCOTT. Well, well, well. I know the sort of thing you *mean*, of course, but . . . oh, how about something Russian?

ESTHER MAE. Oh, have you got something *Russian*?

MISS SCOTT (*with a straight face*). Well, if you don't mind a *translation*. I haven't anything in the *original*, I'm afraid.

ESTHER MAE (*completely missing the sarcasm*). Oh, that's all right.

MISS SCOTT. Let's see. A cheery little number by Tolstoi, or Dostoevski?

ESTHER MAE. Oh, it sounds wonderful! Does it *grope*?

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MISS SCOTT. Oh, and HOW! Starts off in a lunatic asylum and ends up in the morgue! You get it, will you, dear? (*Esther Mae rises.*) It's over there on the second shelf. (*Pointing to bookcase down right.*) It's in a black cover with a tombstone on the back — and just about the size of Webster's Unabridged Dictionary. [*Esther Mae starts to cross above table to right.*]

ESTHER MAE. Hello, Ned.

NED. Hello, Esther Mae.

ESTHER MAE. What are you reading?

NED. Oh, just a book.

ESTHER MAE (*edging closer*). What is it? Western story?

NED (*covers book with his hands*). No, it . . .

ESTHER MAE (*laughing*). Oh, for goodness' sake! There's no harm for boys to read Western stories. I mean . . . well, after all, you're only young once. Is it the "Shooting of Dan MacGraw"?

JOHNNY (*from his corner*). Dan McGrew. Not "McGraw"!

ESTHER MAE (*turning*). Oh! I didn't see you hiding there!

JOHNNY. I'm not hidin'. I'm readin'.

ESTHER MAE (*snubbing him*). Well, whatever you're doing is no skin off my nose. (*To Ned.*) Is it, Ned?

NED (*still covering book*). Is it what?

ESTHER MAE. "The Shooting of Dan Mc-what-he-said"?

NED. No.

ESTHER MAE. Well, what is it?

NED. It's — er — Swedish.

ESTHER MAE. Well, what's the name of it?

JOHNNY. What do you care? That's no skin off your nose either, is it?

ESTHER MAE (*angrily*). I'm not talking to you! What is it, Ned?

MISS SCOTT. Just a moment. (*Sweetly but pointedly.*)

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The book you want, Esther Mae, is on the second shelf, near the end.

ESTHER MAE. I just wanted to know what he was reading.

MISS SCOTT. Well, that's his affair, isn't it, dear?

ESTHER MAE (*moving to bookcase down right*). Oh, yes'm, but, goodness! I don't see why he should be ashamed of it.

CARRIE (*to Miss Scott*). Gee, aren't young boys funny?

MISS SCOTT. Funny?

CARRIE. Uh-huh. It takes 'em so long to grow up. Girls get to be women so much quicker than boys do. I mean . . .

MISS SCOTT. Yes, I know what you mean.

CARRIE. Take me, for instance. I feel a million years older than — than . . .

MISS SCOTT. Than who?

CARRIE. Oh, you know.

[*She nods backward towards Ned.*]

MISS SCOTT (*sweetly*). Maybe that's because you've learned how to "live," as you call it.

CARRIE (*nodding*). Uh-huh. Living's awfully important, don't you think, Miss Scott? I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't live. Honestly I believe I'd die.

MISS SCOTT. You probably would.

[*Esther Mae has found her volume and now rises and takes a step towards left, but as Ned, feeling secure, has removed his hands from his book, Esther Mae cannot resist the temptation of looking over his shoulder to see what it is.*]

ESTHER MAE (*reading*). "The Yearning Void in the Soul of Nora." Oooooooooo!

NED (*rising; he's mad*). You didn't have any right to do that!

ESTHER MAE. Where on earth did you get a book like that from?

NED. Never you mind. This is my book and . . .

ESTHER MAE. Well, where'd you get it?

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MISS SCOTT. Just a moment — just a moment! What seems to be the trouble?

NED. It's her, Miss Scott! She snuck up behind me and read the title!

ESTHER MAE. I didn't "snuck up" — and what if I did?

MISS SCOTT. *Please!* Esther Mae, you know very well you shouldn't have done that.

ESTHER MAE. I just wanted to see what it was.

MISS SCOTT. Yes, but he didn't want you to. You knew that and yet . . .

ESTHER MAE. But where did he get it? Did you tell him about it?

MISS SCOTT. He asked for it.

ESTHER MAE. But how'd he know enough to ask for it?

MISS SCOTT. That's none of my business, and none of *yours* either!

ESTHER MAE. But where'd he hear about it? A book like that must be for adults, isn't it?

NED. Who're you saying's not an adult? I'm 's much an adult as you are! More! I'm older!

ESTHER MAE. Don't be funny!

NED. Well, how old are *you*?

ESTHER MAE. It's not age that counts. It's — it's experience. Isn't it, Miss Scott?

NED. Well, if you ask me, I think it's *manners!* And you're both acting like brats!

CARRIE. Oh, for goodness' sake, Esther Mae, don't argue with him!

NED (*to Carrie*). Yes, and I'm thirteen days older than *you* are, too!

CARRIE (*rising and turning*). You're no such thing! How do you know how old I am?

NED. Because my mother told me. We were both baptized the same day in the Presbyterian Church. Only when they sprinkled us you yelled and I didn't!

CARRIE. Why, you . . .

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NED. An' you've been yelling ever since about something or other!

CARRIE. Oh!

MISS SCOTT (*who has risen*). Stop it, all of you! Do you hear me? I'd hate very much to have to call the Chief of Police. Think how it would look if the "Black Maria" had to be backed up to the door of the public library.

[*A slight pause.*]

NED. I'm going into the other room, Miss Scott. I'd like to read my book in peace (*He goes to archway.*) and I didn't bring a "flit gun"!

[*He goes out.*]

ESTHER MAE (*at right, looking after Ned*). Oh, did you hear that?

MISS SCOTT. That will do, Esther Mae. You brought it on yourself.

[*She sits.*]

ESTHER MAE. But there wasn't any use his getting mad like that. I wonder where he heard about that book!

MISS SCOTT. I'm sure I don't know.

ESTHER MAE. He must have heard somebody talking about it. He'd never pick out a book like that by himself. I wonder . . .

JOHNNY (*from his corner*). And curiosity killed the cat.

ESTHER MAE (*turning to him*). What did you say?

JOHNNY (*innocently*). Did I say something?

ESTHER MAE (*angrily*). You know good and well you did!

MISS SCOTT. Just a minute! You keep out of this, young man! It's no concern of yours.

JOHNNY (*rises and speaks over bookcase*). Gee, Miss Scott, I guess I must have been readin' out loud.

ESTHER MAE. Oh, yeah?

MISS SCOTT. Reading out loud?

JOHNNY (*holding up book*). Yes'm. Don't you remember? There's a sailor in here they used to call "Curiosity" and he didn't like the ship's cat, so one night . . .

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MISS SCOTT. That will do! And listen to me, all of you!
Do any of you happen to know *why* Mr. Carnegie left all his money to found institutions like this one?

CARRIE. To get the people educated, wasn't it?

MISS SCOTT. Not entirely.

ESTHER MAE. I guess it was because he was a philanderist and didn't know what *else* to do with his money. You know, like Rockefeller got his in a foundation and gave it to Standard Oil.

MISS SCOTT. No. Mr. Carnegie was a Scotchman, and like a lot of other Scotchmen he didn't talk much. He *loved* this country, but he said there ought to be at least *one* place in every city, town and village throughout America where a person could go and *not get into an argument!*

[The vestibule door at left opens, and Miss Abercrombie comes in, carrying some books. She is about 30, and quite pretty in a pink-and-white sort of way, but she is inclined to purr and mince, and her affectations are liable to cloy. Her speech smacks of "prunes and prisms"; she inflects too much and one feels that at almost any moment she might burst forth and render a little ditty about "birds" and "springtime."]

MISS ABERCROMBIE. Oh, how do you doooooo, Miss Scott?

MISS SCOTT. Hello, Miss Abercrombie.

MISS ABERCROMBIE. Oh, and loooooook! Two of my dear, sweet girrrrrls!

[She doesn't see Johnny, who has resumed his chair.]

ESTHER MAE AND CARRIE. Hello, Miss Abercrombie.

MISS ABERCROMBIE. It always makes me soooooo happy when I find my pupils in the li'bry. It shows such a lovely, serious attitude, I think. Don't you, Miss Scott?

MISS SCOTT. Well, it depends on what they come in for, of course.

MISS ABERCROMBIE. Oh, of course. But when I read in the papers that so many high-school students spend their spare time in dance-halls . . . Well, you're much better

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off here with Mr. and Mrs. Browning and the Brontë girls than you'd ever be in a night-club or in one of those awful "juke-boxes."

MISS SCOTT. Yes, the chairs here are a little hard but it's certainly more comfortable than in a "juke-box."

[It is evident that Miss Scott doesn't care for Miss Abercrombie, but she conceals this fact exceedingly well.]

MISS ABERCROMBIE. Well, I brought these back. (*Placing books, one by one, on the desk.*) "The Stars and Constellations and How They Effect Our Everyday Emotions." Really, too, toooooo heavenly!

MISS SCOTT. Yes, the stars generally are, I think — heavenly, I mean. Four cents overtime charges.

MISS ABERCROMBIE. Yes, *aren't* they? So far away and mysterious, and at night, you know, when they sort of twinkle at me, I just wonnnnnnder what they're trying to say to me! Oh, and here's "The Autobiography of an Intravert." Oh, dear! That's quite deeeep, isn't it? I'd no idea!

MISS SCOTT. Well, I didn't read it, but I should think it might be. Six cents on that.

MISS ABERCROMBIE. And "Poems, Lillies and Bon-Bons" by Lucy LaDouceur.

[Miss Scott shudders.]

MISS SCOTT. Ten cents for the "Bon-Bons." Lucy's got a new one now, you know. "Sonnets, Petunias and Animal Crackers." I saved it for you.

MISS ABERCROMBIE. Oh, how sweeeet of you! She's so lovely and vague and moody — so full of what the French call "rien de tout"! You know it's what she doesn't say that's so important. Why, one of her poems has only *two* words in it but when you stop and think of what she *might* have put in it and *didn't*, it takes your breath away.

MISS SCOTT (*with gentle irony*). What I like about her is if you happen to lose your place, it doesn't make a bit of difference.

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MISS ABERCROMBIE. I think she's the coming poetess of America. But, oh dear! I do hope she won't get to be *too* popular. Because it's sooooo much fun to read a thing through several times and say finally, "There, now, I understand what she's talking about but I don't think anyone else will." Well, I won't stop to take anything today. I have to get home early. I'm expecting someone for supper. (*She laughs rather sillily.*) A young mannnn, too! And I want to have something dainty and niiiiice for him. We're going to have a little chat about books and things. Just a couple of hours of cozy culture. So I mussssst hurry. Good-bye. Good-bye, girls.

[*She starts upstage.*]

MISS SCOTT (*rising*). Wait — wait!

MISS ABERCROMBIE (*stops*). Yes?

MISS SCOTT. Tell me, Miss Abercrombie, did you read (*She pauses significantly.*) "The Yearning Void in the Soul of Nora"?

MISS ABERCROMBIE. Oh, yesssssss! And I adore it! I talk about it alllll the time — to evvvvverybody. To me, it's the most beautiful thing that's come out of Europe since "The Meditations of a Misplaced Echo." Good-byyyyyye!

[*She goes out through vestibule; Miss Scott sits down.*]

ESTHER MAE (*fairly bursting*). Ooooooooooooo! (*To Carrie.*) What do you know about that?

CARRIE. I — I don't know what you're talking about.

ESTHER MAE. But didn't you hear what she said about "The Yearning Void in . . ."

CARRIE. Of course I heard! You don't think I'm deaf, do you?

ESTHER MAE. Then *that's* where Ned heard about it! Do you think he's got a crush on *her*?

CARRIE. Of course not, silly!

ESTHER MAE. But he must — he must have! Or he

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wouldn't be reading a book like that. Nobody's seen him around much lately and . . . Oh! I bet they're having supper together.

CARRIE. What makes you think . . .

ESTHER MAE. She said a young man was coming to supper and . . .

CARRIE. H-h-he's just a boy.

ESTHER MAE. But a boy'll turn into a young man if you don't watch him, won't he, Miss Scott?

MISS SCOTT. What's that?

[*Having made her point she pretends to be very busy and not interested.*]

ESTHER MAE (*going towards her*). Oh, Miss Scott, do you think so?

MISS SCOTT. Do I think what, Esther Mae?

ESTHER MAE. Do you think Ned Prouty's got a crush on Miss Abercrombie?

MISS SCOTT. Oh, I don't know, dear. Probably.

CARRIE. W-why do you say "p-probably" like that?

MISS SCOTT (*elaborately casual*). Oh, nothing. I just mean . . . well, Miss Abercrombie's a very attractive woman; Ned's a very intelligent young man. I should think they might be very — er — sympathetic.

ESTHER MAE. Oh, but she's so much older and . . . oh, goodness!

[*She starts towards right.*]

MISS SCOTT. Where are you going?

ESTHER MAE. I — I'm just going in here to — to . . .

MISS SCOTT. No, you're not! You're going to leave Ned Prouty alone! Do you understand?

ESTHER MAE. Oh, but Miss Scott, I want to *know*! I want to *find out*!

MISS SCOTT. Yes, I see you do. But you'll have to wait to find out later. And somewhere else — not here.

[*A slight pause.*]

CARRIE. Come on, Esther Mae. Let's go.

BOOK-LOVERS

ESTHER MAE. *Go? Now* — right in the middle of . . .

CARRIE. Yes. I want to get out of here. I — we've been here long enough.

ESTHER MAE. But he's your boy-friend! Don't you want to find out if he's in love with . . .

CARRIE. No. I don't care if he is! Anyway, he's not my boy-friend. And besides, I don't believe he could be. I heard Mrs. Boyle tell Mother the other night she thought Miss Abercrombie used one of those new chemical "lustre-rinses" on her hair. Know the kind made out of coal-tar and peanuts? Do you think so, Miss Scott?

MISS SCOTT (*sweetly*). I wouldn't know, dear. Does it matter?

CARRIE. Oh, no, it doesn't matter — 'specially but . . .

MISS SCOTT. Whatever she uses, it does the trick, doesn't it?

CARRIE. I'm going.

[*She hurries out left.*]

ESTHER MAE (*calling*). I may stick around, Carrie! I want to — sort of . . .

MISS SCOTT. No, dear. You ought to go along with her.

ESTHER MAE. Oh. Why?

MISS SCOTT. Well, you're her *friend*, dear, and I think she may be just a little bit upset. She'll want someone to talk to.

ESTHER MAE. Oh, gee — gosh. Well, if you think that . . . but, Miss Scott, will you . . . I mean if you . . .

MISS SCOTT (*smiling*). You mean if I find out anything, will I let you know?

ESTHER MAE. Well, I — I didn't mean that exactly but . . .

MISS SCOTT (*still smiling*). What did you mean, dear?

ESTHER MAE. I — oh, nothing — nothing. G'bye. (*She goes out, calling.*) Carrie! Yoo-hoo!

[*Johnny rises and comes downstage near corner of center bookcase.*]

BOOK-LOVERS

JOHNNY. Gee, Miss Scott, you — you ought not to 've done that.

MISS SCOTT. Oh, no?

JOHNNY. And you just up and did it on purpose, too.

MISS SCOTT. You might almost say "with malice aforethought."

JOHNNY. But, gosh, I didn't know you'd do a thing like . . . Gee, that wasn't right.

MISS SCOTT. You're not a very bright young man, are you?

JOHNNY. Ma'am?

MISS SCOTT. Just why wasn't it "right"?

JOHNNY. 'Cause it'll get all over town that Ned Prouty's nuts about a high school teacher. They'll kid the poor guy so much he'll have to leave town or catch measles or something.

MISS SCOTT. No. I don't think so. Before they get a chance to kid him, it'll be all over.

JOHNNY. Ma'am?

MISS SCOTT. Ned likes Carrie, doesn't he?

JOHNNY. I guess so. He's been goin' with her ever since he got out o' three-cornered pants.

MISS SCOTT. And I suppose she dropped him to go with older boys. (*Johnny nods.*) Well, now she'll pick him up again.

JOHNNY. You mean 'cause she thinks he's in love with Miss Abercrombie? (*And now she nods.*) Say, you don't think he *is* in love with Miss Abercrombie, do you?

MISS SCOTT. I wouldn't know about that.

JOHNNY. At *her* age?

MISS SCOTT. Every boy falls for at least *one* woman who's much older than he is. It's part of the "growing-up" process, like taking up geometry, buying a razor, quoting "Omar Khayyam." I daresay it isn't very serious with Ned. Just an infatuation.

BOOK-LOVERS

JOHNNY. Infat — infatu — What's that?

MISS SCOTT. Well, it's like a very earnest conversation over long-distance, only when you get through you find out you were talking to the wrong party.

JOHNNY. What happens? They hang up on you?

MISS SCOTT. Sometimes. But usually before they even have a chance to, somebody right in the same room with you calls you away from the telephone.

[*Carrie appears in doorway left. Johnny ducks back to his chair.*]

CARRIE (*smiles a little uncertainly*). Oh — er — hello.

ESTHER MAE (*who has also appeared*). She says she forgot something.

CARRIE (*to Miss Scott*). I bet you didn't expect to see me back so soon, did you?

MISS SCOTT (*tactfully*). Well, let's say, I *hoped* you'd come back. You said you'd given up reading, and I think that's such a mistake for anybody who's going in for hard and furious living like you are.

CARRIE. Yes'm, and I — it's really because I've got something I want to write for the school paper and I don't know what to write about and I don't know anything about the subject anyway, so I thought I'd better — er — look it up in the reference books.

MISS SCOTT (*sweetly*). The reference books are in the other room.

CARRIE. Yes'm, I know they are. I mean, I know that's where they used to be. (*She hesitates.*) Is it all right for me just to go on in there and . . .

MISS SCOTT. Of course, dear, of course. The Encyclopaedia Britannica is out at the moment — having its face lifted — but everything else is there, and I daresay you can find what *you're* looking for.

CARRIE. Thank you, ma'am.

[*She goes out right. Esther Mae starts after her.*]

MISS SCOTT. Where are *you* going, Esther Mae?

ESTHER MAE. I was just going in to help her.

BOOK-LOVERS

MISS SCOTT (*gently but firmly*). Oh, no. I don't believe I would, dear. She'll make more headway by herself.

ESTHER MAE. But . . .

MISS SCOTT. You know there are some things in life — like looking up references — that are very delicate operations, and people can do them much better when they're alone.

ESTHER MAE. But she won't be alone. Ned's in there.

MISS SCOTT. Yes. That's what I meant.

ESTHER MAE. Oh. (*She sits rather heavily in the chair above reading-table.*) Miss Scott, you don't think Ned really *is* in love with Miss Abercrombie, do you?

MISS SCOTT. Listen, Esther Mae. Do you know why I never married?

ESTHER MAE. Ma'am? No, ma'am. I often wondered. You're awfully attractive. And some days, when you've just had a facial and are fixed up and the light hits you just right, you're almost nearly beautiful. Why didn't you marry?

MISS SCOTT. Because years ago my mother told me that *any* woman, if she was intelligent, could understand *any* man. Now, *I'm* intelligent — but *Mother was wrong!*

ESTHER MAE. Oh.

MISS SCOTT. That theory was started generations ago, and in my opinion it was started by a *man*. He did it deliberately to give women a false sense of security, so that any time they wanted to, men could come along and knock the props out from under them. Take my advice and never count on what a man will do next, because from the very nature of the brute he's more than likely to do something else. (*Johnny suddenly rises, strides boldly around the end of the central bookcase, and without any warning, plumps himself down in the armchair right of Miss Scott's desk. Miss Scott is somewhat amazed.*)

Well, what's the matter with you?

JOHNNY. This book. I don't like it.

[*He puts it on the edge of the desk.*

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MISS SCOTT. What?

JOHNNY. That book. It's no use. I don't like it.

MISS SCOTT. Don't like it? Why, I thought you did.
What's the matter with it?

JOHNNY. I don't know. But it just doesn't ease my mind.

MISS SCOTT. Doesn't do *what*?

JOHNNY. Doesn't ease my mind.

MISS SCOTT. What in the world are you . . .

JOHNNY. Don't you remember? I asked for something
to ease my mind?

MISS SCOTT. Well?

JOHNNY. Well, that book won't do it.

MISS SCOTT. No? Well, what sort of book do you think
will "ease your mind"?

JOHNNY. I don't know. Maybe I don't want a book.

MISS SCOTT. Well, what *do* you want?

JOHNNY. I don't know. Maybe I just want to sit here.

MISS SCOTT. Sit here? What *are* you talking about?

JOHNNY. I don't know.

MISS SCOTT. Well, I'm sure I don't know if you don't.

JOHNNY. Er — you don't mind, do you?

MISS SCOTT. Mind what?

JOHNNY. Mind if I just sit here?

MISS SCOTT. No, no — go right ahead! But I don't see
how you're going to "ease your mind" by just sitting
there and looking at me.

JOHNNY. Well, it'll help — just to look at you.

MISS SCOTT. It . . . (*And suddenly she gets it.*) Ohhhh!
(*With an effort she keeps from smiling.*) I see . . .

Well, well, well. Mother was even more wrong than I
thought she was. (*Playing up.*) Well, it's awfully
nice of you to want to just sit there and look at
me, Johnny. I'm afraid I'm not much to look at
but . . .

JOHNNY. Oh, well, I guess some people might not think so,
but . . .

MISS SCOTT (*smiling at him*). But you do, eh?

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ESTHER MAE (*involuntarily gasping*). Oh. (*The others turn and look at her. She becomes self-conscious.*) I — I didn't say anything.

MISS SCOTT. Well, you just go right ahead and look at me, Johnny, but you don't mind if I go on checking up these card-files, do you? I'm way behind, this week.

JOHNNY. I guess that's my fault, ain't it? Isn't it?

MISS SCOTT. Your fault?

JOHNNY. Yeah. Comin' in here every day like I been doin', and worryin' you.

[*Esther Mae lets out another gasp. Her eyes are like saucers.*]

MISS SCOTT. Oh, well, it is a little distracting to have a young man, a handsome young man — always around but — Oh, wait a minute!

[*She reaches for the telephone and begins dialing.*]

JOHNNY (*in sudden alarm*). You ain't callin' up the police to have me bounced out, are you?

MISS SCOTT. Oh, far from it — far from it! (*Into phone.*) Hello. Nellie? What are we having for supper tonight? Oh, I see. Well, Nellie, do you think you could slip out and get *another* lamb chop? Yes, I may bring a friend home. Good. Good-bye.

[*She hangs up. Carrie and Ned come out through archway right. They pause for a second, looking a little self-conscious. Then, as though they had agreed beforehand on their plan of campaign to meet the situation, they march straight over to the vestibule door. Carrie goes out. Ned, remembering the book he is still carrying, comes down to the desk.*]

NED. Er — here's the book, Miss Scott. I guess I won't have time for it today. Much obliged.

MISS SCOTT. "The Yearning Void" all filled up, eh? Well, I'll keep it for you in case you need it again.

NED. Thank you, ma'am. (*He pauses uncertainly — then to Johnny.*) See you down at the Cut-Rate for a marshmallow hash?

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JOHNNY (*grinning*). Not me, buddy. I'm eatin' lamb chops!

[*Ned looks at him for a second, puzzled, then goes out.*]

ESTHER MAE (*rises, feeling distinctly out of things*).

Well, I like that! After me sticking around and waiting for her and everything, she just walks right out and leaves me flat!

MISS SCOTT. Yes, it didn't take her long, did it, with the reference books, once she got started?

ESTHER MAE. Well, I — I guess I'd better . . . gosh, I don't know what to do. There's nobody *home* now. I suppose I *could* go down to the Cut-Rate but — it's Friday afternoon. It's always so crowded there Friday afternoon — I mean for just a — just a girl to go in, by herself.

MISS SCOTT. Oh, no, dear, you mustn't do that. Johnny'll be going to the Cut-Rate in just a minute. He'll walk there with you.

JOHNNY. Me?

MISS SCOTT. Yes, to get something for *me*. Don't you remember? We were to get it last night, but we got so interested in what we were talking about, and it was such a beautiful moonlight night.

JOHNNY. Oh, yeah. Sure. I forgot. (*To Esther Mae.*) I'll walk with you. Wait outside. I'll be 'long in a minute.

ESTHER MAE (*miffed*). Well, if you can tear yourself away!

[*She marches out left.*]

MISS SCOTT (*folds her arms and looks at Johnny*). Did I say a little while ago that you weren't bright? I withdraw my statement. You'll go far. (*Johnny grins at her.*) Only I'M not so sure in which direction. You'd better go along.

JOHNNY. Oh, no hurry. She'll wait.

MISS SCOTT. No, thanks. I don't want her coming in here plucking my eyes out one by one. Go on.

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JOHNNY (*rises*). Gee, I'm ever so much obliged, Miss Scott — and, Miss Scott . . .

MISS SCOTT. Yes?

JOHNNY. I don't know as how I'd ever want to be infatu — infatu — what is it?

MISS SCOTT. Infatuated?

JOHNNY. Yes'm. Infatuated. I don't know as how I'd ever want to be that way — sounds kind of dumb to me — but if I ever did, could I be it with you?

MISS SCOTT. Open Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays 'till five-thirty; Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays 'till nine.

JOHNNY. S'pose I wanted to get infatuated on a Sunday?

MISS SCOTT. I don't work Sundays. See my sister, Nellie. She's organist in the Episcopal Church, and you can catch her in all day. By the way, I'd better cancel that lamb chop. (*She reaches for the phone.*) But I'm warning you, if she's already bought it, I'm going to collect from you. To keep people from talking, you can pretend it's overtime on "The Cruise of the Schooner 'Jasper.'" (*Handing him book.*) Take it!

JOHNNY. Gee, do I have to? I can read when I'm an old man.

MISS SCOTT. That's what they all say. Oh, and you better take this, too.

[*Hands him a printed form.*]

JOHNNY. What is it?

MISS SCOTT. It's a pamphlet we give out to new customers — and old ones we haven't seen in a long time. It's called "How to Use the Library."

JOHNNY. "How to Use the Library"? I don't need it. I know.

MISS SCOTT. Oh, no, you don't! All you know is "How to Use the Librarian"! Now, hurry up! Beat it! Get out of here!

[*Johnny grins and departs as the*

Curtain Falls

■

HOMETOWN

By

MARCUS BACH

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CAST

DAD
MOM
JACK
MARY } *the McCall family*
GEORGE NELSON, *a young clergyman*
JULIA MORTIMOR, *a lady in her mid-thirties*
MRS. WEAVER, *a neighbor*
TIME. Today.
PLACE. A small town.

HOMETOWN

It is Sunday noon at the McCalls. Their hometown is Ellis, Illinois, but it might be any village of around a thousand population. Our scene is the living room of the McCall home. The place is modestly furnished in the style of good American middle-class surroundings.

As the curtain rises, there is no one in the room, but the conversation in the dining room just adjoining, and the occasional sound of plates give, by suggestion, the setting of the dinner and the character of the McCalls.

DAD. So I said to Charlie, "Charlie," I said, "us businessmen have simply got to adjust ourselves to the times. Emergencies," I said to him, "are like the weather" . . .

MOM. Reverend Nelson, do have some more chicken. I'm afraid you're not eating.

NELSON. Not eating! Mrs. McCall, this will be my third helping!

DAD. "Like the weather, Charlie. We don't let the weather get us down." Take my store now: McCall's General. What did I have when we came to Ellis? My two bare hands and a head for business, that's all . . .

[During Dad's lines the telephone in the front room rings two shorts and a long.]

JACK. Listen, Dad, was that the phone?

DAD. Was it?

MARY. Not our ring.

DAD. Ellis was only a crossroads twenty-three years ago.

I remember . . .

MOM. John . . .

[The reason Mom silences Dad is because on Dad's lines the telephone ring has repeated. The group is silent again, but so is the phone now.]

MARY. It must have been Miss Mortimor's.

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JACK. I'll go and see.

MOM. Now, Jack, I wouldn't run away from the table.

Do have some more carrots and peas, Reverend Nelson.

NELSON. I'm afraid I'm disgracing myself.

[The phone rings again as before.]

JACK. Mom, I'm sure that's our ring.

MARY. Listen.

[The group is silent. The phone doesn't ring.]

MOM. A party line is so inconvenient sometimes.

DAD. Take the time of the depression. Everything seemed to be going to pieces. I said, "Boys, a man's got to expect storms."

MARY. Shall I help you with the dessert, Mom?

DAD. What did you make, Mother, apple pie? Hilda makes the best doggone apple pie you ever tasted.

[The phone rings as before.]

MARY. I'm sure that's ours.

[Mary, a girl of twenty-one, comes to answer the phone while Dad continues talking in the other room. Mary picks up the receiver, is about to say "hello" when she discovers that someone else is using the line. She listens in and her expression indicates that it is some juicy bit of gossip that she is overhearing.]

DAD. What did we know about vitamins when we were kids? The best thing, I always say to Hilda, is to eat the right kind of food.

MOM. You take coffee, Reverend Nelson?

NELSON. Yes, thank you.

JACK (calling). Is it for me, Mary?

MARY (covering the mouthpiece). No — it's — ah — it's long distance!

JACK. Long distance! Excuse me, please! (Jack, a fellow of not quite eighteen, comes in.) Honest? Long distance?

MARY (in a whisper). It's Miss Mortimor.

JACK. She's not long distance, she lives just across the street.

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MARY. She's talking to Albert Hicks.

JACK. What you listening for?

MARY. Sh-h!

JACK. You women.

MARY. Oh, Jack, he's . . .

JACK. Come on, lay off that or I'll tell the preacher.

MARY (*to herself*). Oh, no, this is too wonderful!

JACK (*in a make-believe call*). Reverend Nelson!

MARY. Jack!

[*Mary returns the receiver to the hook in a hurry.*]

NELSON (*from the other room*). Yes, Jack? Is it for me?

JACK (*starting back to the dining room*). I was just wondering, do you take sugar in your coffee?

MARY (*also starting in*). Yes, we have plenty. We hardly ever use our allotment.

[*Mary and Jack are back in the dining room.*]

DAD. That's another thing. When this rationing business came along, I said, "Nothing's so bad but what it could be worse."

[*The telephone rings two long and a short.*]

MARY. That is our ring. Excuse me, please.

[*Mary returns.*]

DAD (*meanwhile*). . . . Always had the idea that we could always go along our own sweet way. Doggonit, we never thought half enough of our country.

MARY (*at phone*). Hello. Oh, yes, Mrs. Berkey, I'll call her. Mom, it's for you.

MOM. Goodness, so much disturbance on Sunday noon, when I wanted everything to go off so smoothly.

[*Mom comes in. She is in her early forties, wears a spotlessly clean apron over a modest dress.*]

MARY. Mrs. Berkey.

MOM (*good-naturedly*). She would have to call just between the dinner and the dessert.

MARY (*before giving her mother the phone*). Mom, Julia Mortimor's going to be married!

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MOM. Julia is!

MARY. I just heard her talking to Albert Hicks!

MOM. Oh, I would love to have heard that! (*She catches herself.*) Well, go in and serve the coffee. And motion to your father not to ask for a second piece of pie. (*Mary goes.*) Yes, Mrs. Berkey. Oh, yes, Reverend Nelson is here. We are just at the dessert. Yes, that's right, apple pie. No, not *à la mode*. Yes, too heavy . . . I think so, too. What? Julia Mortimor? You don't say! To Albert Hicks? Well, think of that . . . No, not a soul. Just a minute, Mrs. Berkey. (*Mom goes.*) It's Mrs. Berkey, Reverend. I'll keep your coffee warm.

NELSON. I'll just be a minute.

DAD. I don't know whether you will or not with her, Reverend.

MOM. John . . .

[*Nelson, a young minister of about twenty-five, goes to the phone.*]

NELSON. How-do-you-do? (*Long pauses.*) Thank you, I . . . Yes . . . I think that's . . . I say, I think that's . . . If the . . . Yes, I say if the . . . That's very nice of you to say you liked the sermon, Mrs. Berkey. What's that? I may be expecting a visit from Miss Mortimor? I see . . . Oh, I see . . . Yes, I see . . . Oh, no, I won't say a word, Mrs. Berkey. Thank you very much. (*He hangs up and returns to the dining room.*) Mrs. Berkey, calling to tell me she liked the services this morning.

DAD. Well, she's right. And the way you christened those babies, Reverend, a fellow'd think you'd been doing that all your life!

NELSON (*laughing*). My first time, Mr. McCall!

MOM. Now, just enjoy your dessert, Reverend.

[*The front door opens, and Julia Mortimor comes in. She is rather lean-looking, wears glasses, is dressed for Sun-*

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day, and is a typical small town bachelor girl of about thirty-five. Her enthusiasm today is genuine and causes her to be a most likable person. She might even be called romantic.

JULIA. Mrs. McCall! Yo-ho! I came right in!

[*Ad. libs. from the table greet her, and Mary comes out.*]

MARY. Glad to see you, Julia. I didn't have a chance to speak to you in church this morning.

JULIA (*buoyant with enthusiasm today*). Speak to me, Mary?

MARY. I wanted to tell you how nice I thought you looked.

JULIA. Do you? I mean, do I? Isn't it a lovely day!

MARY. It's cloudy.

JULIA. I don't mean outside. I mean — in here. (*On this last line, she presses her hands passionately against her heart, and almost does a pirouette.*) The world is wonderful, wonderful!

MARY. You think so? With all that's going on?

JULIA. I mean our world, our hometown — everything like that! Mary, oh, — he's here, isn't he?

MARY. Who, Julia?

JULIA. The new minister? Yes, I see he is. Weren't those babies lovely this morning!

MARY. The one cried awfully, I thought.

JULIA. That was the Alexanders'. The dear tiny little thing. And did you see old Mr. Williams, the sexton? He had tears in his eyes. I suppose it took him back to his own little girl. The one that died, you know. My! I never realized before how wonderful everything really is! Deaths, christenings, weddings!

[*Dad comes in. He is a wholesome fellow just a bit on the portly side of forty-five. He is wiping the last of the apple pie from his chin with his kerchief.*]

DAD. Well, Julia, you're looking lovely.

JULIA. Do you think so? Maybe there's a reason, Mr. McCall, maybe there's a reason!

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MARY. I think she looks like a June bride myself.

JULIA. Does it show? Does it really, really show that much? I wish I could embrace the whole town!

DAD. Well, you could start in a small way, Julia, and sort of work up.

[Mom and Nelson come in. Mary goes out during the first lines.]

NELSON. Miss Mortimor, how-do-you-do?

JULIA. Wonderful, Reverend, wonderful! And Hilda, how are you?

MOM. Glad to see you, Julia. Now, here, there's place for everyone. Reverend, please, this comfortable chair.

NELSON. I'm sure that's Mr. McCall's place . . .

DAD. I can sit there every night. In fact, I do. Take my shoes off and relax. If there's anything nicer than just to come home and take off a man's shoes and pull the socks off his feet . . .

[Mom pleads with a glance.]

MOM. Maybe, Julia, you want to talk to Reverend Nelson privately?

JULIA (*nervously*). It's no secret. Really, it's no secret.

[She twists her kerchief, not knowing just how to proceed.]

NELSON. And how is your mother, Miss Mortimor?

JULIA. In her chair at the window. It was so nice of you to bring her that book the other day.

NELSON. Nothing at all. When I get old and confined to my chair, I'm sure the people of Ellis will bring me books, too.

[There is a bang against the front door.]

DAD. Or that!

MOM. Oh, that paper boy!

NELSON (*laughing*). Is that what it was?

JACK (*coming through on a run*). Sunday paper!

MOM. Jack, please!

DAD (*good-humoredly*). Since that Davis boy's been delivering the papers, he rides his bike like Paul Revere and

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throws those papers as if they were shrapnel. The door's just about busted in already.

JULIA (*losing none of her rapture*). And isn't it wonderful how he hits the same spot every time? Our door's the same way. But, at least, it's nice that the papers don't come now until after church; it used to be that everybody had an excuse to stay away.

[*Jack comes in with the Sunday edition.*]

MARY (*coming in*). Rotogravure section, Jack!

DAD. Sports!

MOM (*horrified, but amused*). What must Reverend Nelson think?

NELSON. Well, Mrs. McCall, I guess the Sunday edition ranks among America's great institutions. Just like apple pie.

DAD. There you said it, Reverend! Doggone, if you didn't hit the nail on the head!

JULIA. I'll have the society page, Jack.

MARY. And you, Mr. Nelson?

JACK. I'll give you part of the front section.

NELSON (*solemnly*). Yes, the war news, Jack.

JACK (*seriously*). I know.

[*For an instant the above two lines cause a deep and serious note.*]

MARY (*breaking the mood*). That leaves the comics and the want-ads for you, Mom!

JULIA (*folding back her section of the paper*). Here's just the way I want it. My wedding picture!

DAD. Wedding picture!

MOM. Well, Julia, is it really going to happen?

MARY. Not to Albert, surely!

JULIA. Reverend Nelson, you will do it, won't you?

NELSON. I've never known a minister to refuse.

JULIA (*showing Mom and Mary the picture*). Like this! See how he has his arm crooked up and hers crooked in? And he's in a uniform, just like Albert.

JACK. Is Albert Hicks . . . ?

HOMETOWN

JULIA (*thrilled*). Didn't you know he was a soldier?

JACK. I sure didn't, Julia. I knew he was out of town, but I didn't know he was in camp.

JULIA. He's a corporal. He's got these same stripes on his sleeve. And he stands just that straight!

NELSON. And when is this all to be, Miss Mortimor?

MARY. Yes, this is pretty sudden.

JULIA. You're the first ones I've told. Not another soul in Ellis knows about it. Albert called and said I should ask Reverend Nelson if he could make it next Sunday at three o'clock.

NELSON. Three o'clock is fine. Church wedding, is it going to be?

JULIA (*rapturous*). A church wedding!

[*Jack goes out unobtrusively, taking part of the paper with him.*]

DAD. Everybody in town and his dog'll be there. It's not often Julia gets married!

JULIA. A church wedding at three in the First Church of Ellis. Albert and I coming up the aisle . . .

MARY. Soft music . . .

JULIA. Mary, you'll play, won't you?

MARY. I wouldn't miss it!

[*Mary hums part of the "Wedding March."*]

DAD. And Hilda there will sing, "I Love You Truly!"

MOM. Now, John.

DAD. You used to sing that darn pretty.

JULIA. I'm so excited!

NELSON. Well, so am I, Miss Mortimor. My first wedding.

DAD. If you do as well as you did with the christening, it'll be just all right.

JULIA (*with a luxurious sigh*). The christening . . . The babies were so wonderful — wonderful.

DAD. You never can tell, Julia, maybe some day . . .

[*Dad has gotten up to get some shoe boxes which he has stored in the room.*]

HOMETOWN

MOM. Now, John, what are you going to do?

DAD. Show Reverend my collection.

MOM. When we're all excited about Julia's wedding?

MARY. I have just the thing for you to wear, Julia. A most beautiful veil. I'll get it.

[Mary goes.]

JULIA. Think of me with a veil, and everyone looking at me . . .

NELSON. You can tell Corporal Hicks it's all right. Or shall I get in touch with him?

JULIA. I'll do it. I promised to call him right back. He had to take some men out to the firing range, but he said he'd only be a little while. May I just put in the call from here?

MOM. Of course, Julia. Do you have the number?

JULIA. How could I forget!

[Julia goes to the telephone. Dad, meanwhile, has been bringing about eight boxes, the size of shoe boxes, which he has set on the floor near his chair.]

MOM (*smiling*). Well, Reverend, I guess you are in for it.

NELSON. Looks interesting.

DAD. Don't know if this is as interesting as the wedding, but I thought you might not mind taking a look at — rocks!

[On his last word, he pours one collection of rocks from a box.]

NELSON. Say, you have a collection!

DAD (*pouring out another box full*). Know anything about the business?

NELSON. I'm sorry now that I don't.

MOM (*good-naturedly*). Well, John's no geologist himself.

DAD (*pouring out another box full*). Nope, just a hobby.

MOM (*as before*). I'm sure that's enough for a start, John.

NELSON. Rocks and more rocks!

DAD (*picking up one of the stones*). Now here's one came

HOMETOWN

from New Jersey. Isn't that funny, Hilda, one of the best I've got happens to be right here on top. That's calcite, Reverend. Lift it.

[Dad gets down on the floor.]

JULIA (*at phone*). Sarah? Oh, I didn't know you were Central this afternoon. Sarah, I want to have you long distance me to Albert. The number is — oh, you *know* what the number is! . . . She knows what the number is! (*Happily*.) That's the wonderful thing about living in Ellis!

MOM (*going back to Julia*). It won't take Sarah long to get through.

[Mom and Julia talk at back, while the action returns to Nelson and Dad.]

NELSON. Calcite? They find these in Arizona, too, I believe.

DAD (*thrilled*). Right! Say, I bet you know all about this business! Here's a willemite from out east. Willemite. Zinc silicate is what it is. And here's a piece of scheelite.

NELSON. These are beauties.

DAD. The way to see them is under one of those lights. Take this dirty looking calcite. Under the light it glows like the milky way. Only that it's red. You don't see the red now, but it's there. As Julia'd say: wonderful, wonderful. Well, sir, it is. These here rocks come from all over the United States. I tell you we've got a great country.

NELSON. And you must have traveled a good deal.

DAD. Traveled? I've hardly been out of the county. Folks send me rocks from around where they live, and I send them rocks from around Ellis. We've got some of the grandest in the world. Take this specimen right here now . . .

JULIA (*at phone*). Sh-h.

DAD (*in a whisper to Nelson, under Julia's first lines*). I

HOMETOWN

saw this piece out in a ravine not two miles from town. Folks thought there wasn't anything worthwhile around here, but this looks like it might hold tungsten to me . . .

JULIA. Hello? Albert! Yes, of course it's Julia, d-d-darling. Reverend Nelson says next Sunday at three is fine. You're going to what? Oh! . . . He says he's going to give you ten dollars if you tie it tight! . . . Albert, you're so clever. And how is the army? Oh, that's fine. Did you tell the general yet? And the commander-in-chief? About the wedding? Oh, yes, of course. Sunday at three, Albert. Good-bye, Albert. Albert . . .

[Julia turns the phone away and gives Albert a kiss over long distance.]

DAD. Say, now, that was a sweet one!

MOM. Don't you think, Reverend Nelson, we ought to have a dinner at the church? Sunday noon?

NELSON. That's an excellent idea.

JULIA. Oh, that would be too wonderful!

DAD. Sure, then we could keep you there for a good shiv'ree.

JULIA. Oh, Mr. McCall! You get me all aflutter! (*The phone rings, Julia picks it up immediately.*) Hello? Albert? Oh, Sarah . . . No, put it on my bill. Yes, that's right. No, I understood fine. You want to congratulate me? Oh, thank you, Sarah. Thank you very much!

[Mary comes in with a beautiful white wedding veil.]

MARY. Here we are!

MOM (*while a gasp escapes Julia*). Where in the world did you dig that up, Mary?

MARY. It was yours, Mom. I used it in the school play once.

[She puts it on Julia.]

DAD. Doggone, I guess the geology of America will have to wait.

HOMETOWN

JULIA. I feel like a queen! Just like I'd been crowned!

MARY. Oh, it's becoming! Now a white dress with a train . . .

NELSON. And a bouquet . . .

MOM. And a bridesmaid . . .

DAD. And Albert draped on your other side.

JULIA. In his uniform! It'll be like making Ellis the center of the whole country!

NELSON. I'm beginning to think it is.

MARY. What do you mean, Mr. Nelson?

NELSON. This morning during the christening I thought so, too. Those children are America. Our church, the homes we try to make, Sunday dinners, apple pie, Mr. McCall with his rocks, Miss Mortimor in her wedding veil — if all that isn't the center of the whole country, what is?

DAD (*quietly*). You're saying big words there, Reverend.

JULIA. I wish it would be today — at three. Think of having a whole week to wait!

MARY. Only a week! Think of me!

MOM. Now, Mary, you still have plenty of time . . .

[*The door has opened, and Mrs. Weaver comes in. She is a lovable, motherly woman in her late forties. At the moment she is courageously holding back tears.*]

MRS. WEAVER. Hilda . . .

MOM. What is it, Mrs. Weaver?

MRS. WEAVER. He's gone — Reverend Nelson, my boy Harold — is gone.

MARY. Oh, that's too bad.

NELSON. Come, Mrs. Weaver, when did this happen?

[*Julia quietly removes the veil and goes to back, where she stands listening.*]

MRS. WEAVER. He was eating dinner — I brought it to him in bed, just as I have for almost five years. I went to the kitchen and heard nothing at all — when I came back he was dead.

MOM. Oh, so suddenly.

HOMETOWN

MRS. WEAVER. I didn't have time to call Doctor Lehman or anyone.

NELSON. I surely sympathize deeply with you.

[*Jack comes in, having been drawn in by the news. He stands visibly affected.*]

MRS. WEAVER (*to Reverend Nelson*). I'm so glad you were there to see him just yesterday. (*To Mom.*) They said I should go away from the house for a while, and I thought there wasn't a better place to come than here.

MOM. Of course.

JACK. How old was Harold now? About eighteen, wasn't he?

MRS. WEAVER. Eighteen.

NELSON. And his accident happened five years ago?

MRS. WEAVER. It will be five years next month.

JACK. He was such a swell guy.

JULIA. There's someone at the back door, Mrs. McCall.

MOM. Excuse me.

[*Mom goes.*]

DAD. He was climbing the roof of the new school building and he fell. I'll never forget that day. Everybody in town was thinking about Harold Weaver, not knowing whether he'd live or not. I remember when the doctors gave out the report that he wouldn't ever walk again.

MARY. Nobody was more patient than Harold.

JACK. Nobody had more courage.

MRS. WEAVER. The people of Ellis were so good. There wasn't a day, but what somebody stopped in. Harold was always afraid folks would laugh at him — at the things he did — you know, like when he started knitting. He always used to hide what he was working on when somebody came. Until . . .

JACK. Until that time Dad happened to go over and catch him at it.

JULIA. He knit that whole sweater for Albert. And it was fine.

HOMETOWN

MRS. WEAVER. Yes — the soldiers — they were on his mind all the time.

JACK. Yeah. . . . We often talked about them.

NELSON. Your son's been a fine Christian character, Mrs. Weaver. I'm sure he had a real influence, and performed something like a ministry here in Ellis.

MRS. WEAVER. It'll be awfully lonely without Harold.

[Jack moves over to a window, where he remains in thought.]

NELSON. And you had a good ministry, too, caring for him as you did.

MRS. WEAVER. That was nothing, nothing.

DAD. Doggone, you know, when you get to thinking about things, it's all like a big plan . . . *(Jack turns during the next lines and listens, impressed.)* I don't know just how I mean — but it all seems to sort of fit. The town wouldn't have been right without us having had Harold for a while. It just seems things have to be — like Julia getting married — like a new minister coming to town — even the war — everything seems to have a meaning behind it all.

MARY. I'll go over and see if there's something I can do, Mrs. Weaver.

MRS. WEAVER *(rising)*. Yes, and I must go back.

NELSON. You stay a while longer. Mary and I'll go over and we'll let you know when they want you to come.

[Nelson and Mary go.]

JULIA. It doesn't seem right, me having been so happy when there are other folks so sad.

DAD. Don't be foolish, Julia. It's just what I've been trying to say. It's all part of things. Say, you know what I've been thinking? Jack, I don't want you to breathe a word of this to your mother. But you know, there might just be something stirring in that young preacher.

JULIA. Something stirring?

HOMETOWN

MRS. WEAVER. What do you mean, Mr. McCall?

DAD. The way he took right up calling our Mary by her first name. And the glances he gave her at the dinner table. And the way just now the two of them went over to your place together.

JACK (*not without a smile*). Oh, Dad . . .

JULIA. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it would be a match?

MRS. WEAVER. Mary'd be an awfully good woman for a minister.

DAD. It's just an idea, mind you. But I sometimes get ideas about things long before they happen. I was saying to Dave Sessions the other day, "Dave," I says, "I don't know why, but I got a hunch there's going to be a storm about tomorrow afternoon." Sure enough, tomorrow afternoon came and what did it do? George Lehman's barn blew down, Pete Benson's brooder house was ripped clean off his farm, and lightning struck Sam Duncan's bull. That bull was the best in the county. How's a man get prophetic like that? So when I saw Reverend Nelson ask Mary certain things at dinner, an idea sure hit me . . .

[*Mom enters.*]

MOM. They'd like to have you come, Mrs. Weaver, if you will.

MRS. WEAVER. Yes, sure.

MOM. John, put those stones away now. There'll be people stopping in.

[*Mom and Mrs. Weaver go.*]

JULIA (*also preparing to go*). I want to thank you, Mr. McCall.

DAD. Thank me? For what?

JULIA. You make me see things better.

DAD. I don't know what you mean, Julia.

JULIA. Albert's a little bit like that, too.

DAD. Like what?

JULIA. He gets ideas. When I told him about the chris-

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tening this morning, he said, "We'll talk that over, too!"
And the way he said it!

[She goes flustered to the door.]

DAD. Just don't forget, Julia, I've always wanted to be a godfather.

JULIA. Oh, Mr. McCall!

[Julia goes. Jack is at the window. Dad starts picking up the rocks and returns them to the boxes.]

DAD. Come now, son. There's no use taking things so serious. Harold Weaver had a pretty hard time these five years. I'll bet he suffered more than he ever let on. The town'll do what it can for Mrs. Weaver. There's nobody that wouldn't help her. And I'm sure if Harold could talk to us he'd say, "Now, I'm all right. Don't be unhappy on account of me."

JACK. It's not that, Dad. *(He turns to his father.)*
What would you think if I'd join up?

DAD. Join up? The navy, son?

JACK. I've been thinking about it plenty. And, I don't know, things happening today just sort of helped me make up my mind.

DAD. What things, Jack?

JACK. Maybe it's Ellis. Maybe it's the whole country, maybe it's just having a feeling that we've got something to sort of want to keep.

DAD. You're pretty young.

JACK. It's not age. I suppose everybody comes to these ideas sometime. I don't want to seem silly, but even when I see you with those stones, it seems to mean something . . .

DAD. And even apple pie and Sunday papers. I know. And it's folks dying and folks getting married — and it's a kind of an American way that a man just can't explain.

JACK. What do you say, Dad?

DAD. About what any dad would say, I guess. You're my son and I'm mighty proud of you.

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JACK. And Mom?

DAD. We've talked this over a good many times, your mother and me. It's up to you, and when you've seen a cause as you have seen it, I'm pretty sure she'll understand.

JACK. That's swell.

[*Mom enters.*]

MOM. My goodness, John! Think of what Mrs. Harrison just told me!

DAD. Now, what?

MOM. She said she heard that our Mary and Reverend Nelson were going together!

DAD (*with a touch of triumph*). See!

MOM. See?

JACK. Sure, Mom, that was Dad's idea!

MOM. You don't mean that you . . .

DAD. Well, I just . . .

JACK. He just had a hunch, like the one he had about the storm!

DAD. Sure, and you know what happened!

MOM. Oh, but, John, this is awful!

DAD. I just happened to mention it to Julia.

MOM. That's right. Mrs. Harrison said that Julia had told Mrs. Berkey over at the Weavers and Mrs. Berkey told Mrs. Williams . . .

JACK. And Mrs. Williams told Mrs. Harrison . . .

DAD. No wonder a newspaper in Ellis never made a go of it!

[*Mary comes in.*]

MARY. Mom! What do you think Mrs. Green just asked me?

MOM. I can imagine.

MARY. Asked me whether Reverend Nelson and I were *engaged*.

MOM. Engaged!

DAD. Well — are you?

MARY. Oh, Dad, how preposterous!

HOMETOWN

JACK. Isn't there *anything* to it?

MARY. Well, he did ask me to go to dinner with him next Sunday after Julia's wedding.

DAD. See! There you are!

MOM. Oh, but, Mary . . . well, of course, he's very nice . . .

MARY. Oh, Mom, it's nothing serious!

MOM. No, no, I didn't mean to insinuate that! Only, of course, you're bound to go with someone, and naturally a mother . . .

DAD. And naturally a father, too.

MARY (*laughing*). Oh, Dad!

DAD. And now, let's all go in and do up the dishes. While we're doing that, Jack's got something to tell us, too.

MOM (*turning to Jack instinctively*). Jack . . .

JACK. Dad says you'll think it's okay, Mom.

MOM. I'm sure it is, Jack. Sometimes, I think I have a pretty good American family.

[*She goes to Jack. Dad stands with the boxes of stones in his hands. Mary has the bridle veil admiringly in her possession as the*

Curtain Falls

■

VIVA MEXICO

By

BETTY BANDEL

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CAST

PORTER, *sizable Mexican of Pancho Villa type*

J. P. SIMPSON, *middle-aged American business man*

MRS. SIMPSON, *J. P.'s wife, middle-aged American housewife*

MILDRED SIMPSON, *sharp-faced, bright, 12-year-old daughter of the Simpsons*

OLD LADY, *American tourist of modest means*

CAPTAIN, *Mexican army officer*

DR. RAMIREZ, *quiet, polished, youngish Mexican diplomat*

MRS. RAMIREZ, *beautiful and silent wife of the diplomat*

THREE RAMIREZ BOYS, *aged five, eight, and ten*

OLDER AND YOUNGER SEÑORITAS, *Mexican maiden ladies of the nice schoolteacher type*

JOAN CABOT, *American student on an exchange fellowship to Mexico*

BEGGAR

JUAN, *leader of peons*

JOSÉ, *one of peons*

THREE MEXICAN WOMEN, *large and garrulous, friends of the peon-soldiers*

SOLDIERS, PEONS

TIME. Between the Wars.

PLACE. Mexico.

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SCENE I

The scene is the interior of a Pullman car on a train which runs between the United States—Mexico border and Mexico City. At present the train is stopped, and it is likely to remain stopped for some time, since a bridge is out ahead, and the repair crew which is being sent from Mexico City cannot be expected to fix the bridge before tomorrow afternoon, which will be twenty-four hours from now. The porter, a sizable Mexican wearing the customary white jacket, but no hat, and looking like a movie version of Pancho Villa, is explaining all this, very patiently, to his passengers; but some of them, particularly the Americans, are having trouble grasping the idea. They cannot understand, for instance, why the crew cannot start until tomorrow morning, and they do not think that the seven-hour day, nor the trade unions, nor the fact that this is the eve of the Sixteenth of September, should be allowed to enter into the question at all. The American girl, Joan Cabot, who is occupying Lower One, and who is reading the Atlantic Monthly, is looking very trim and cool and unperturbed, but then she has just received an exchange scholarship, through the efforts of her own and the Mexican governments, and is on her way to Mexico City for a winter of study as the guest of the Mexican government. She therefore feels very kindly toward Mexico, even when its trains break down. Anyway, she has been in Mexico often before, and knows what to expect. The two timid Mexican sisters who have Upper One are also unperturbed. They are schoolteachers. They sit carefully forward, since four large paper sacks filled with food, to be eaten en route, are lined up against the back of the seat. Under

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the berth are crammed two small traveling bags and the assortment of boxes and parcels, each tied with string, which usually accompany Mexican travelers. They sit, very prim and correct in their hats, veils, and carefully darned and pressed gloves, their hands folded, themselves the picture of respectable, middle-aged maiden ladies. Section Five, occupied by Dr. Ramirez, his beautiful wife, and their three young boys, aged five, eight, and ten, is also quiet. Mrs. Ramirez and two of the boys face forward; Dr. Ramirez and his oldest son sit opposite. Dr. Ramirez is a member of the Mexican diplomatic service, but even if he were not a diplomat he would be philosophical in any crisis. Section Seven has a Mexican army Captain in the seat reserved for the occupant of the lower, and an Old Lady in a rusty black Queen Victorian dress opposite him. The Captain's overcoat and cap are beside him on the seat, and a trim, heavy suitcase is under the seat. He is also remaining quiet, but the Old Lady, who has her umbrella, large knitting bag, and small overnight bag beside her, to say nothing of the pillow which the Porter has given her, is exhibiting signs of agitation. She is holding her hands very tightly clasped and is listening breathlessly to all that is said. After all, they are dreadfully far from the United States border, and it might so easily be not just a simple mechanical disturbance which had stopped them. It might be something quite dreadful, like bandits. Section Three (the four sections, one, three, five, seven, are the only ones which show to the audience, and section one is at the extreme right, while seven is at the left) is the real storm center. There Mr. Simpson, American business man, Mrs. Simpson, and sharp-faced, twelve-year-old Mildred Simpson are being firm with the Porter. Mr. and Mrs. Simpson face forward; Mildred is opposite them. Mr. Simpson has risen up from the litter of coats, time tables, golf clubs, and boxes of candy to make his point perfectly plain. He knows that the Porter understands only a few words of English, and understands much less if the subject

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is not agreeable, but he plans to make up in English — or American — volume for what he lacks in Spanish vocabulary.

MR. SIMPSON (*his index finger within six inches of the Porter's nose*). Now look, you! I want to see the conductor, and I want to see him quick! I want to know how long we're going to be stuck here!

PORTER (*shrugging*). *¿Quién sabe?*

MR. SIMPSON. What?

MILDRED. He says he doesn't know, poppa.

MR. SIMPSON. Well, why don't he? What's the matter with this train?

PORTER. Nothing, *señor*. Train fine. Road bad.

MR. SIMPSON. What's happened to the road?

PORTER. Bridge out.

MR. SIMPSON. Bridge out? (*With relief*.) Is that all?

MRS. RAMIREZ (*to her husband*). Did you hear? A bridge destroyed — could it be bandits?

OLD LADY (*her hand at her throat*). Bandits!

CAPTAIN (*reassuringly*). No, no, *señora* — just a bridge damaged, perhaps washed out by too much rain in the mountains. We have had no bandit trouble here in Mexico for a long time — not for months.

OLD LADY. M-months!

CAPTAIN. And especially not along this railroad. It is the principal one to the City of Mexico, and soldiers guard it.

MRS. RAMIREZ (*to husband*). But could it not be malcontents? Your papers — are they . . .

[*She leans forward, reaching toward a briefcase which Dr. Ramirez has at his side. He interrupts her quickly, taking her hand and pushing her gently back into place.*]

DR. RAMIREZ. No, no, my dear. Be calm. There is nothing to fear. Only an ordinary delay.

MR. SIMPSON. Delay! How long? It oughtn't to take a crew long to fix a little washout . . . Heh, porter? (*He*

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has turned to look for the Porter, and finds him with his little ladder, about to climb up beside the Simpsons' section.) What are you doing?

PORTER. I make up berths.

MRS. SIMPSON. Berths! It's broad daylight! Well, I never!

MR. SIMPSON (*looking at his watch*). It's five o'clock! What's the idea?

PORTER (*shrugging*). We must wait. What else is there to do, but sleep?

MR. SIMPSON (*very suspicious again*). How long are we going to wait?

PORTER. *¿Quién sabe?* One day — two maybe.

MR. SIMPSON (*shouting*). Two days! Look here, you! (*Shaking finger under nose again.*) Where's the conductor? Tomorrow night at 8:45 P. M. J. P. Simpson makes the principal address at the opening banquet of the international convention of the Men of Commerce! I'm J. P. Simpson! I've been working on my speech for just about six months, and you or nobody else is going to keep me from giving it! I'm going to get to Mexico City, and I'm going to be in the main dining room of the Hotel North America tomorrow night at 8:45 P. M., if I have to fly in!

PORTER. *¿Señor?*

MRS. SIMPSON. Fly! Fly! Airplane!

[*He gestures with his hand to show an airplane taking off.*]

PORTER (*a light going up*). Oh, plane!

[*He continues the evolutions of the imaginary ship with his hand, executing some intricate spins, rolls, etc.*]

MR. SIMPSON (*with reserve*). Is that the way your planes act in Mexico?

PORTER (*remembering*). No planes. No big towns anyplace around here. No fields for them.

[*The Porter, sensing some hitch in his plan to make up*

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the berths, takes his ladder a few feet out of Mr. Simpson's way, and sits down on it.

MR. SIMPSON. My God!

OLDER SEÑORITA (*twisting around to look at Mr. Simpson*). *¿Qué tiene?*

YOUNGER SEÑORITA (*leaning forward to speak to Joan Cabot*). My sister asks, what ails him?

JOAN (*looking up from her magazine, and speaking in the amused drawl which young American intellectuals adopt when discussing Men of Commerce*). Nothing. He's probably going to be late for dinner tomorrow night.

YOUNGER SEÑORITA (*confused*). *¿Mande?*

JOAN. He is supposed to make a speech in Mexico City tomorrow, and he is afraid he may not get there in time.

YOUNGER SEÑORITA. *¿Qué lástima!*

JOAN. Yes, isn't it a shame? Think how disappointed the Men of Commerce will be.

MR. SIMPSON (*his lips tight, and his hands in his pockets*).

You're right, young lady, they will be. They're all busy men. They spend most of their waking hours making money so their daughters can buy silk stockings. They don't have the time to wait on a bunch of incompetents tinkering around with a washed out road, because they've got to get back to their offices to make more money for more silk stockings.

JOAN (*snapping her magazine shut briskly and rising to the bait*). Just offhand, I can't think of any of my contemporaries who have nothing better to do than gobble up silk stockings . . .

MR. SIMPSON. What are you doing right now, if I may ask?

JOAN. I'm going to Mexico City to work . . .

MR. SIMPSON. Work!

JOAN. On an exchange scholarship.

MR. SIMPSON (*indulgently*). Oh, you mean study.

JOAN. That's a form of work, you know, especially when

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you happen to have an obligation to your own government and the government of the country you are visiting . . .

MR. SIMPSON. Government! What's a nice young girl doing getting herself mixed up with an outfit that . . . ?

JOAN. I had the honor to be chosen for one of the exchange fellowships . . .

MR. SIMPSON. Honor! Now, miss, a country that takes two days to fix a washout!

PORTER. Oh, no, *señor*. They can fix it faster than that.

MR. SIMPSON. Well, why don't they?

PORTER. Crew has to come out from Mexico City. Takes maybe all day tomorrow to get to the bridge.

MR. SIMPSON. All day tomorrow? Why, if they started now . . .

PORTER. Cannot start now.

MR. SIMPSON. Why not?

PORTER. Cannot work during night — they get in trouble with union.

MR. SIMPSON. Work? All they'd be doing would be riding along on steel rails. Is that work?

PORTER. Anyway, tomorrow is Sixteenth of September.

MR. SIMPSON. What?

JOAN. It's their Fourth of July, their Independence Day. They have a big celebration tonight, especially in Mexico City.

MR. SIMPSON (*sinking back into his berth*). My God, the crack train of the line is held up, while they shoot off fire-crackers!

MRS. SIMPSON. I told you this wouldn't be any kind of a vacation. I never did trust foreigners. And they say the food just isn't safe.

YOUNGER SEÑORITA (*turning round and speaking over the back of the seat to Mrs. Simpson*). Does the *señora* lack food? We have plenty.

[*She makes a gesture toward the sacks behind her and her sister, but Mrs. Simpson hastily forestalls her.*

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MRS. SIMPSON. Oh, no, thank you very much. You're very kind, but I'm sure we won't need any; the diner . . .

MILDRED. Why don't you see what they have, momma?

MRS. SIMPSON (*looking straight ahead*). Be quiet, Mildred.

MR. SIMPSON. See? They don't even trust their own diners.

JOAN. Nonsense. Many people in Mexico carry their own lunches on the trains. And they did it long before the present regime came to power.

MR. SIMPSON. Still and all, I'll bet you these two ladies don't approve of the way things are being run . . .

JOAN. You think not? *Señorita*, tell the gentleman what your job is.

YOUNGER SEÑORITA (*proudly*). My sister and I are schoolteachers. My sister even teaches in the high school. She is chemistry teacher.

JOAN. And what do you think of the government today?

YOUNGER SEÑORITA (*gently*). They try to help the people of Mexico, I think.

JOAN (*triumphantly*). There! What more can a government do?

MR. SIMPSON (*shrugging*). Naturally, if they work for the government, they're going to like it. (*He turns back to face forward again, and sees the Porter still sitting and listening.*) When are you going to get the conductor?

PORTER. He can do nothing, *señor*. . . . You want the berth made now?

MR. SIMPSON. I do not! I want some definite information . . .

[*There is a commotion at the left entrance to the car, a few shouts outside, and a beggar in filthy rags comes bursting in. The Porter makes a dive for him, but he slips by and runs up to the Captain. The Porter turns to follow, shouting and waving.*]

PORTER. ¡Epa, tú! ¡A fuera!

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CAPTAIN (*waving him back sharply*). Silence! It is all right.

[*The Porter backs off, and the beggar leans over, speaking rapidly to the Captain in an undertone. The Old Lady flattens herself against the back of her berth, drawing as far as possible from the beggar's rags. The beggar turns swiftly and starts down the car toward the right entrance, his hand outstretched as if he would beg from the passengers. The first section he passes is five, in which the Ramirez family is seated, and as he goes by Dr. Ramirez, he darts out a hand, across the Mexican, grabs for something, and starts to run. Ramirez, with a sharp exclamation, pulls his briefcase back out of the beggar's hand, and rises, lunging toward the beggar. Mrs. Ramirez screams. Mildred jumps up on her seat to watch the proceedings. The intruder, unsuccessful in his attempt to get the briefcase, abandons his prize and scurries down the car and off right. The oldest Ramirez boy tries to give chase, but his father collars him.*

DR. RAMIREZ. Stop him!

PORTER (*shouting and chasing the beggar*). ¡Alto! ¡Ay!

MR. SIMPSON (*dazed*). What . . .

MRS. RAMIREZ (*starting up*). Your papers . . .

DR. RAMIREZ (*sharply*). Be quiet, Eloisa! Everything is all right! (*To Porter, who has disappeared into the entranceway, and now returns.*) He got away?

PORTER. Yes, señor. He was too quick. But he won't get in again.

[*He turns and goes back into the passageway. The Old Lady, unable to bear the strain another moment, gathers up her knitting bag and umbrella, and rustles down the train to Section One.*

OLD LADY (*desperately, speaking to Joan*). May I sit with you?

JOAN (*rising immediately, and seating the Old Lady*).

Why, certainly! You are not ill?

OLD LADY. Oh, no — that dreadful filthy man . . .

VIVA MEXICO

JOAN (*consolingly*). All beggars look like that here.

OLD LADY. But he was a thief!

JOAN. You have the army to protect you . . .

OLD LADY. I'm afraid of them, too. I never should have tried to make the trip, even with the rate of exchange so favorable.

MRS. SIMPSON. Mildred, get down off of there!

[*Mildred slowly slips back into place.*]

MR. SIMPSON (*rising*). Say, what was all that? (*To Ramirez.*) Did he steal anything from you?

DR. RAMIREZ. Oh, no, he did not get anything, thank you, sir. Please do not trouble yourself. He was just a pickpocket.

MR. SIMPSON. Well, that's a fine thing to happen on a train. I thought soldiers protected this line. And here this bird comes aboard and . . . What was he doing talking to that officer?

CAPTAIN (*rising and confronting Simpson*). What do you mean?

MR. SIMPSON. I thought you fellows were supposed to guard these trains . . .

CAPTAIN. I am not on duty, *señor*.

MR. SIMPSON. No, and even if you were . . . He seemed to know you.

CAPTAIN (*speaking slowly and distinctly, and moving so close to Simpson that he has to look down into the American's face*). He was begging from me. As to what I would do on duty — does the gentleman wish to imply I am a coward?

MR. SIMPSON. Now wait a minute, Captain . . .

DR. RAMIREZ (*rising and stepping between the men*). Yes, Captain, let us be patient. The gentleman does not understand our ways, or all our problems. He did not mean any insult . . .

MR. SIMPSON (*in real surprise*). Oh, no . . .

CAPTAIN. I hope not.

MR. SIMPSON. No, sir! This is all new to me. I sup-

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pose some of you fellows have trouble understanding all these new government experiments yourselves, don't you?

[He addresses himself chattily to Dr. Ramirez.]

CAPTAIN (*laughing a little*). You think Dr. Ramirez is of the old regime?

DR. RAMIREZ. You know me?

CAPTAIN. Who in Mexico does not know Dr. Ramirez?

He was a surgeon, *señor*, but now he is one of our leading diplomats, and has often been in Washington, representing our government on special missions there.

JOAN (*rising in excitement, and coming toward the group*).

Are you really the great Dr. Ramirez?

DR. RAMIREZ (*smiling*). I am Ramirez, *señorita*.

JOAN. My word! This is an honor!

MR. SIMPSON (*now definitely confused, but jovial*). Say, what is this? A whole trainful of Mexican New Dealers?

CAPTAIN (*his attention recalled to Simpson*). The gentleman has not yet explained his remark about the army.

JOAN. Please, Captain, my countryman does not know Mexico. When he does, he will come to love it, as we all do.

CAPTAIN (*bowing, the Latin soldier immediately submerged in the Latin gallant*). If you love it, *señorita*, your countryman does not matter. Perhaps the *señorita* will tell me more of her love of Mexico . . .

[He has stepped past Ramirez and Simpson, toward Joan, but she hastily retreats toward Section One.]

JOAN (*smiling and shaking her head*). Another time, Captain. I really must arrange to send word ahead. My friends were going to meet me . . .

CAPTAIN. But there is no way . . .

JOAN. Now, Captain, you don't suppose the telegraph has stopped working, along with the train, do you?

MR. SIMPSON. Telegraph! Why didn't I think of that?

Say, do they have an office over there in that village?

[Peering out of the window.]

JOAN. They must have . . .

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CAPTAIN. Pardon me, *señorita, señor*. I do not think you need to bother. The crew will not be long in getting here.

MR. SIMPSON. Captain, you and I don't spell that word "long" the same way. Come on, miss, let's see what we can find . . .

CAPTAIN (*stepping in front of Simpson*). I do not believe it is safe to leave the train.

MR. SIMPSON. What?

DR. RAMIREZ. Why not, Captain?

CAPTAIN. There must be more men like that beggar who know the train is held up, and are hanging around looking for a chance to pick pockets.

DR. RAMIREZ. I think we can all protect ourselves, Captain. *Señor*, I too wish to send a telegram, if I may accompany you.

[*He is starting toward the left exit, when the Captain definitely bars the way.*]

CAPTAIN. The *señor* was right when he said it is the duty of the army to protect the trains. Even though I am not on duty, I must take charge in this emergency. Until the train is again in service, you may not leave the car.

DR. RAMIREZ. What foolishness is this, Captain? You haven't the slightest authority . . .

CAPTAIN. No, Doctor? The soldiers in the second class cars are my authority.

DR. RAMIREZ. But what danger is there? What emergency? As you yourself said, we have had no bandit trouble for months, not even a little revolution.

[*Faint scream from Old Lady.*]

CAPTAIN. Nevertheless, I intend to take every precaution . . .

DR. RAMIREZ. Nonsense! Come on, *señor* . . .

[*He starts for the exit, with Simpson following a little hesitantly, when the Captain blocks him with a raised hand.*]

CAPTAIN. Stop! (*He turns toward the exit, shouts an order. There is an answering shout outside, and in a moment there is a scuffle, and two Soldiers, carrying rifles*

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and wearing helmets and full field equipment, enter and salute. The Captain returns the salute and issues orders swiftly.) No one is to enter or leave this car! Guard the doors!

[The Soldiers salute again. One takes up a position at the left entrance, the other marches past Ramirez, Simpson, and Joan to the right entrance, where he also stands at attention. There is a moment's pause. The Captain resumes his seat.]

MRS. SIMPSON. Well, I never!

MR. SIMPSON. Look here, you — you can't get away with this! *(The Captain is absorbed in the view out the window. Simpson turns to Dr. Ramirez.)* What are you going to do?

DR. RAMIREZ *(smiling and sinking back onto his seat)*. Do? Nothing, *señor*. For the time being, there is nothing I can do.

MR. SIMPSON. But are you going to let this — this . . . ?

DR. RAMIREZ. The Captain has won this time, *señor*. Let us save our energy.

MR. SIMPSON. Do you mean to say . . . ?

[He turns helplessly toward Joan, but she is already resuming her seat.]

JOAN. Dr. Ramirez is right. There's simply nothing to do.

[Simpson is still standing nonplussed, when there is a commotion at the right entranceway: the Soldier there turns quickly and bars the entrance with his rifle, and in a moment the Porter's arm and half his head appear over the rifle.]

PORTER. Heh! What are you doing here?

SOLDIER. ¡Alto ahí!

PORTER *(thunderously)*. What do you say?

CAPTAIN *(rising)*. It is all right. He may come in!

[The Soldier lowers his rifle and returns to his position of attention, and the Porter comes bustling down the aisle.]

VIVA MEXICO

PORTER. What is all this?

CAPTAIN. Never mind! You may make up the berths now.

PORTER. And what if I do not want to, now?

CAPTAIN (*looking at him*). You will make up the berths now.

PORTER. Yes, my Captain.

[*He starts for his ladder, and later goes to the end of the car to get his linen.*]

CAPTAIN. We shall all want to sleep.

OLD LADY. Sleep! (*She gives a little sob.*) With those bandits next to one!

OLDER SEÑORITA. *¿Qué tiene a la señorita?*

YOUNGER SEÑORITA. My sister wonders what is the matter with the *señorita*.

JOAN. Everything is new to her. She is a little afraid.

OLDER SEÑORITA. *¿Es miedosa?*

YOUNGER SEÑORITA. *Sí — pobrecita.*

OLDER SEÑORITA. *Pero debía calmarse —*

[*She thinks a moment, then smiles reassuringly at the Old Lady, and begins to unearth a flat cardboard suit-box from under the seat. She manages to stand up and twist around so that she can lay the box on the seat and undo the string wound around it. Every moment or two she turns to nod reassuringly at the Old Lady.*]

OLD LADY (*apprehensively*). What do they say?

JOAN. She says it is a shame you have been frightened.

I think she is looking for something to calm you.

[*The Older Señorita gets the lid off the box, carefully lays aside several layers of linens, and triumphantly drags forth a large revolver of the six-shooter variety, which she thrusts, barrel forward, toward the Old Lady. The Old Lady flattens herself against the back of the seat and stares at the pistol with the fascinated horror of one viewing an adder at close range. The Older Señorita urges it upon her with several hospitable gestures. Mildred, unable to stand*

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the strain any longer, has climbed back up on her seat while the Older Señorita has been searching for the gun, and is now staring open-mouthed at the weapon.

MILDRED. Momma — look!

Quick Curtain

SCENE II

It is night, and there are dim lights in the corridor. All four sections are made up. The Porter is walking through the car, and the Soldiers are dozing at both doors. The curtains of Lower Three part cautiously, and Mr. Simpson looks out. He sees the Soldiers dozing, steps into the aisle, fastens his bathrobe, and motions to the Porter, who has turned and is looking at him, to be quiet. Simpson pulls a telegraph blank out of his pocket, shows it to the Porter, gesturing toward the village outside. The Porter shakes his head dubiously, pointing to the Soldiers. Simpson brings out money. The Porter hesitantly takes both money and telegram, and is just about to the door when there is a sudden yell outside, and he is pushed back by a crowd of knife-waving, gun-carrying Peons, some of them wearing O.D. shirts, garrison caps, and cartridge belts, who come bursting in. The Soldiers are startled into wakefulness, and scramble to attention, while the Porter, somewhat recovering from his first shock, hastens to thrust the telegram back into Simpson's hands.

PEONS. ¡General! ¡Qué hubo, General! ¡Viva la revolución! ¡Viva México!

CAPTAIN (*swinging from his berth, fully clad and armed with a pistol*). ¡Soldados! ¡Amigos! Welcome!

PEONS. Where is the traitor?

CAPTAIN. Here, muchachos. (*Going to Lower Five.*)

Dr. Ramirez! Come out! Come out at once!

VIVA MEXICO

DR. RAMIREZ (*through curtains of his section*). What is all this noise?

CAPTAIN. Come out, Doctor, come out, or we will pull you out!

DR. RAMIREZ (*thrusting his head through the curtains*). What does this mean, Captain?

CAPTAIN. Not Captain — General. But it is not always safe to wear my general's uniform.

DR. RAMIREZ. Bandits!

[*Heads have by this time popped out of every berth; at "bandits" there is a faint scream from the Old Lady in Upper Seven, and a louder one from the doctor's wife, behind him in Lower Five.*]

MR. SIMPSON. Judas Priest!

CAPTAIN. We have no time to lose, Doctor. Come out!

[*Dr. Ramirez emerges from his berth, pulling his dressing gown around him. His wife looks out through the curtains. Mrs. Simpson, hair-curlers notwithstanding, comes out into the aisle, while Mildred climbs down from Upper Three, keeping carefully behind her mother to avoid being sent back to bed. Joan Cabot, in a trim dressing gown, steps out into the aisle, while the señoritas remain in their berth, peeping out, as do the Old Lady in Upper Seven and the three Ramirez children in Upper Five.*]

DR. RAMIREZ. Who are you?

CAPTAIN. We are friends of Mexico, Doctor. And we are soldiers.

DR. RAMIREZ. So? Then we should be friends.

CAPTAIN. I think not, Doctor. There is no room in Mexico for your sort.

MRS. RAMIREZ. What will you do to him?

CAPTAIN. Nothing, *señora*. There will be no necessity. He will leave the country himself, when the people's government comes to power.

DR. RAMIREZ. People's government! A handful of malcontents!

CAPTAIN. You are wrong, Doctor. All the people will

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rise, when they hear that the revolution has begun.

MRS. SIMPSON. Where did that crowd come from?

CAPTAIN. My soldiers just got aboard, *señora*.

DR. RAMIREZ (*to Porter*). I suppose you are one of them?

PORTER. No, *señor*. Before God, they pushed me!

DR. RAMIREZ. What do you want with me?

CAPTAIN. Only a little time, Doctor. You will come with us for a holiday in the mountains.

MRS. RAMIREZ. A holiday?

CAPTAIN. We will not harm him, *señora*. We will see to it that he does not talk to Mexico City for a day — that is all.

JOAN. What good is that going to do you?

CAPTAIN. He has been in Washington, *señorita*, learning much about our party's activities in the United States — and on this side of the border, too. It would not be well to have him report to Mexico City, before the hour strikes for us — strikes on the glorious Sixteenth of September!

DR. RAMIREZ. Do you think you can keep the government from knowing of this? Do you think they will not hear of a train holdup?

CAPTAIN. Oh, no, *señor*. We will even leave your wife free to telegraph from the village — but they will not have your papers, and for twenty-four hours, at least, they will not be able to get duplicates from Washington. And that is time enough. They cannot know where we will strike, without those papers.

DR. RAMIREZ. Of course you wrecked the bridge.

CAPTAIN. Of course.

DR. RAMIREZ. Were you not afraid it might be fixed too soon?

CAPTAIN. Not on the eve of the Sixteenth, Doctor.

DR. RAMIREZ. And what if I do not go with you?

CAPTAIN (*looking up at the three Ramirez boys*). I think you will go very quietly, Doctor. You would not like to see harm come to your family.

VIVA MEXICO

LEADER OF PEONS. General! Why all this talk? Let us take him!

CAPTAIN. Softly, *muchacho*. In good time.

MR. SIMPSON (*looking toward his wife*). Where's the conductor?

JOAN. Which side of this fight do you want to back now, Mr. Simpson?

MR. SIMPSON. It's their fight. What I want is an American consul.

CAPTAIN. I would not expect the conductor, *señor*. The soldiers stationed on the train are of course ours, and we thought it best to tie up the crew in the baggage car. How is the wounded one, José?

JOSÉ. Bleeding, general.

CAPTAIN (*to the peon leader*). Very well, Juan. Take him.

YOUNGER SEÑORITA. Eh, Juan! Juan Carrillo! Now I know you! Come here to me at once!

JUAN (*starting, and staring up at the Señoritas*). ¡Señorita profesora! ¡Muy buenas noches!

YOUNGER SEÑORITA. A good night indeed! What do you mean by this? Come here to me at once! (*Juan shuffles over to the Señoritas, sheepishly skirting his general.*) What do you mean by turning bandit, you bad boy?

[*She is shaking her finger at him, through the curtain, and the peons giggle and nudge each other as he twists his hat in his hand.*]

JUAN. We aren't bandits, *señorita*. We're soldiers. We didn't mean any harm.

MRS. SIMPSON (*to Joan*). My word!

JOAN. She must have taught him once.

YOUNGER SEÑORITA. Now, you listen to me. Leave Dr. Ramirez alone!

JUAN. I meant no harm.

CAPTAIN. *Díos mío*, what kind of soldiers are these? Juan! Come away from that woman and listen to me!

VIVA MEXICO

YOUNGER SEÑORITA (*as Juan turns hesitantly toward his general*). Put down that knife, Juan!

CAPTAIN. Sergeant! Take charge of your prisoner!

[*Juan, wavering, is pulled to attention by his title. He marches toward Dr. Ramirez.*]

YOUNGER SEÑORITA. Juan! I will shoot!

[*She has poked the big pistol out through the curtains, and as she aims it in the general direction of the armed forces, the Peons turn in panic toward the door. Juan, whirling quickly, lowers his knife for an instant, wavers, then laughs and runs back to the Señorita. He gently takes the pistol from her, and calls to his fellows.*]

JUAN. Do not run, amigos. It has not been loaded since the *señorita's* grandfather hung it upon the wall in the hacienda. The *señorita's* nephew used to play soldier with it. See — it is rusted shut. (*He shows them that he cannot break it open. He turns and shakes his finger at the señorita.*) The *señorita* should not carry such a thing. Someone may become angry if you point it at him.

CAPTAIN (*suddenly recovering, after having nearly joined the Peons when the pistol barrel threatened them*). Sergeant!

JUAN. Sí, general!

[*He returns the pistol to the Señorita and snaps to attention.*]

CAPTAIN. Your prisoner!

JUAN. Sí, general! (*He goes to Dr. Ramirez and takes him by the arm.*) Forward, señor!

DR. RAMIREZ (*pulling back*). May I not dress first?

CAPTAIN. There is little time.

[*Chattering voices off left come near the car, and three excited Women elbow their way through the Soldiers. They are big and fat, and they are talking with hands, arms, and tongues. They bear down on Juan.*]

LEADER OF WOMEN. Heh, Juan! A fine time to play soldier! What do you do here?

VIVA MEXICO

JUAN. Where else should I be, for the love of God?

LEADER OF WOMEN. Where Maria is, you great pig!

JUAN. Maria? What ails Maria?

LEADER OF WOMEN. She is having her baby! And she is very sick!

JUAN. Sick! Why should she be sick?

LEADER OF WOMEN. How should I know why she is sick? But she is sick! Very sick! And if you have a shred of heart left, if you think anything about your firstborn, you will find a doctor!

JUAN. A doctor! Here in the mountains?

CAPTAIN. What is all this chatter, in the name of God?

JUAN. My Maria is sick, General.

CAPTAIN. Sick? The woman said she was having a baby.

LEADER OF WOMEN. So she is, General. And she is sick.

CAPTAIN. Name of God, must Mexico stand still while Maria has a baby? Sergeant, take charge of the doctor!

LEADER OF WOMEN. Doctor? Who is a doctor?

DR. RAMIREZ. I am a doctor.

LEADER OF WOMEN. Then why did you not say so? Why do you stand there like a sheep?

DR. RAMIREZ. Your friends do not want me to move.

LEADER OF WOMEN (*hands on hips, she turns and surveys the Peons*). Who says you are not to move, *señor* Doctor?

DR. RAMIREZ. The General, there.

LEADER OF WOMEN (*going up to the Captain, and thrusting her nose close to his*). Who says the doctor is not to move, *señor*?

CAPTAIN (*retreating slightly*). Where did this woman come from? What kind of soldiers are you? Sergeant, take your prisoner!

JUAN (*he has forgotten he is a sergeant, and his arms are hanging*). *Señor*, Maria is sick!

CAPTAIN. Think of the revolution!

JUAN. Poor Maria! ¡Pobrecita!

VIVA MEXICO

CAPTAIN. Animals! I will take him!

[He rushes toward the Doctor, but the three women close in on him, and he stops, helpless.]

LEADER OF WOMEN. Señor Doctor, will you help us?

DR. RAMIREZ. If you will see that all your friends leave the train.

LEADER OF WOMEN. Who is keeping them here?

DR. RAMIREZ. The general.

CAPTAIN. Soldiers! Do your duty!

LEADER OF WOMEN (*drawing a knife from her dress*). General, it is time to leave.

CAPTAIN (*wavering a moment; looking at the silent, sheepish Peons; then accepting the inevitable, pushing through them to the entrance at left, and turning for a moment*).
¡Viva la revolución!

[He waves his fist, and plunges off.]

LEADER OF WOMEN. Well, Doctor?

DR. RAMIREZ. Go ahead, and show me the way. (*The women push through the Peons and hurry out. Dr. Ramirez turns and pats his wife on the shoulder, then reaches up to tousle his son's hair. He walks to the end of the car, rolling up his sleeves as he goes. The Peons give way. At the entranceway he turns and smiles at the tourists and the silent Peons.*) *¡Señores — Viva México!*

Curtain

STRANGER THAN FICTION

By

PHOEBE SMITH

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CAST

OFFICE BOY

DOROTHY BROWN, *junior stenographer*

SYD WILLIAMS, *reporter*

JACK BENTON, *junior reporter*

KATE LUNDY, *newspaper woman*

FRED KENDALL, *news editor*

TIME. Present.

PLACE. New York.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

The scene is an office in the busy "News Chronicle" building. It is furnished with two desks, one downstage right, one upstage off center left, the latter with two chairs, one by desk center. Downstage left, there is a filing cabinet with high stool. Entrance is upstage right. There is a large modern office window center back, and a corner cupboard upstage left. Both desks have telephones; the one downstage has a typewriter. The office is not particularly tidy; there are papers, clippings, wire trays and baskets, and the usual paraphernalia of such an office, in evidence. The clacking of many typewriters can be heard whenever the door to the outer office is opened.

As the curtain rises, Dorothy Brown is seen seated on the high stool, facing the audience, looking through the top drawer of the filing cabinet. She is young, dainty, and very much in love. She has almost found what she is seeking, when the telephone on the downstage desk rings. With some annoyance, she hops from her stool and crosses to answer it.

DOROTHY. All right, all right. (*Into phone.*) Newsroom, "News Chronicle." Yes, this is Miss Brown speaking. No, there is no one else here at the moment. I beg your pardon — I'm *fired*, but what for? (*She listens intently, then a radiant smile dawns on her face, as realizing who is speaking, she seats herself on the desk.*) Oh, Dick, you really had me scared for a moment. I know, but just the same you shouldn't . . . but *darling*, I told you at 12 o'clock last night that I loved you. No, I have *not* changed overnight. Huh, huh — huh, huh. Oh, honey, you really are a wonderful man. No, Dick, do you really think so? In June. (*The telephone on*

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the other desk rings; she does not hear it. The office boy enters; leaves copy on upstage desk, some letters from Miss Lundy on downstage desk. He looks at Dorothy, who does not notice him, then at ringing telephone, thinks she is goofy, and goes out. She is still saying "Yes, darling" and "Huh, huh," as Syd Williams, always in a hurry, enters. He makes for the ringing phone, calls "Hello," but the party has hung up. He pushes his hat to the back of his head, sits at desk, takes papers from his pocket and begins to work on them. Dorothy becomes very business-like. I'll call you later, madam.
[Hangs up.]

SYD. All right, beautiful, you'd better go snatch a sandwich while there's time. . . . Was that call for me?

DOROTHY. No, Mr. Williams.

[She crosses to cabinet, takes her handbag from the bottom drawer.]

SYD. Has Kendall been in yet?

DOROTHY. No, I haven't seen him. Is there anything else before I go?

SYD. No, on your way, sister. *(As she passes desk, he gives her a coin.)* Oh, you might bring a large packet of cigarettes back with you. I'll be working late.

DOROTHY. Sure, Mr. Williams.

[She exits.]

SYD. Thanks!

OFFICE BOY *(enters briskly; leaves door open. He goes to Syd's desk with copy)*. George says to shoot this stuff along as soon as you can; they're yelling for it; it's late now.

[He exits, whistling.]

SYD. O.K. *(He is looking it over as phone rings.)*
"News Chronicle," Williams speaking. Mr. Kendall?
No, he's not in yet. Yes, I'll tell him. Good-bye.

[While Syd is speaking, a young reporter, Jack Benton, enters. He gives Syd the high sign, seats himself on the corner of Kate's desk.]

STRANGER THAN FICTION

JACK. Hi yer, Syd. That call for me?

SYD. Who d'yer think would call you? No, it's for Kendall again.

JACK. What the devil has happened to that dope? I wish he'd get wise to himself. (*Telephone beside him rings.*) I'll get it. Hello? No, he isn't. Can I do anything for you? Well, he should be here anytime now. Sure, I'll leave a note for him to call you — yes. Goo'bye. [*He makes a note on a memo pad, tears it off, leaves it on Fred Kendall's desk.*]

SYD. Always covering up for that sap.

JACK (*downstage left*). Yeah, can't go on forever.

SYD. Kendall's going to find himself out of the "Chronicle" and on the sidewalk if he doesn't pay more attention to his job. What the heck does he think we are running round here — a kindergarten?

JACK (*in Kate Lundy's chair, with his feet on the desk*). Yep — but they'd probably welcome him with open arms on the homicide squad.

SYD. Why, do you think it's the bumping off of his pal, Tom Campbell, that's eating him?

JACK. Yeah, I sure do. They worked and drank together for years, you know. Fred hasn't been the same since Tom was plugged. He always thinks he is on the point of finding out who did it.

SYD. Yes, and letting himself, his job, and everything else go to blazes while he chases clues.

JACK. He should leave that stuff to the cops.

SYD. Say, can I borrow a smoke, Jack?

JACK. Sure. (*He goes over to Syd, gives him a cigarette and a light — does the same for himself.*) Funny the police can't clean up on that case — pretty slick killer all right, and lots of protection from somewhere.

SYD. Looks like it. Too bad — Tom was one of the best.

JACK. He sure was. Gave me many a kick in the pants, but always ready to give a cub a hand.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

OFFICE BOY (*opens door, sees Jack*). Hello, Jack, Mr. Kendall here yet?

JACK. I haven't seen him.

OFFICE BOY. Gosh. It's like looking for Yehudi.

JACK. Hop it, small fry.

OFFICE BOY (*fed up*). O.K. (*Telephone rings; Syd answers.*) "News Chronicle," Williams speaking. No, he hasn't come in yet. Any message? Oh, hold on, here he is.

[*Fred Kendall enters. He looks tired, dishevelled; he wears a hat and unbuttoned raincoat.*]

FRED KENDALL. Anyone want me?

JACK (*brightly*). Oh, no, just about everyone but Shirley Temple.

SYD. Here, Fred, this is for you; it's Bryant. This is the second time he has called.

FRED (*seats himself on chair beside desk; takes phone. Syd continues with his work*). Hello. Yes, Bryant. Yes, I'll see about it later. Yes, I know I did. Well, I'll see to it tonight sure. I will. All right.

[*Hangs up.*]

JACK (*at downstage desk*). Well, sunshine, how's tricks?

FRED (*taking off his coat and putting it over filing cabinet*). Oh, go to Hitler!

JACK. Sweet natured little cherub! What's up, your usual vice? Not enough water, I suppose.

FRED. Oh, shut up and get out.

JACK. Don't worry, cutie, I'm going. (*He sharpens a pencil.*) I'm covering that Dualey murder case — literally buckets of blood. I'm in for a jolly evening.

FRED. Well, cut the cackle and get going.

JACK. Say, that's no way to speak to a child.

FRED (*looking at him threateningly*). Get.

JACK. No, I won't go till you tell me a story.

[*Fred is exasperated, picks up chair from beside desk as Jack, seeing himself menaced, makes a hasty exit. Fred stands by the door, chair poised, expecting him to return.*]

STRANGER THAN FICTION

But Kate Lundy enters. Kate is about 30, attractive, capable, a good newspaper woman. She is amazed to see Fred with the chair.

KATE. Say, what's going on here?

FRED. Sorry, Kate, I thought it was Jack coming back with one of his wisecracks, and I was just about ready for him.

KATE (*coming down to her desk, taking off her hat and gloves*). Well, you nearly crowned me, and it would have been just too bad for *you*, Fred Kendall, if you had. I'm not exactly the helpless sort, you know.

FRED. Yes, I *know*.

[*He takes chair back to the desk and sits there, slumped over.*]

KATE. Hello there, Syd!

SYD. Hello, Kate.

KATE. Anything new?

SYD. Not a thing, though if Jack had been rash enough to return there might have been.

KATE. I think you're right. What in heaven's name did he do?

SYD. He was about to give one of his Baby Snooks' impersonations. Old sourpuss here threatened to brain him. (*Gathering up his papers.*) Well, I must to Police Headquarters. See you later. So long.

KATE (*opening letters at her desk*). Why the bad temper?

FRED. Anyone would get bad tempered with that young ass cutting up all over the place.

KATE. You shouldn't get mad with Jack; he's only a kid. You used to get a kick out of his wisecracking.

FRED. Oh, there's nothing wrong with Jack; it's *me*, I guess. I know I've been a crab these past few weeks.

KATE. I'll say you have. What's wrong?

FRED. I haven't been sleeping well. I feel rotten.

KATE. You've been drinking too much; that's what's the matter with *you*.

FRED. Yes, I know I have. I'm all jittery.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

KATE. Fred, you're losing your grip. I saw red the other day when I heard the Chief talking about your work. I know there's not a better man in the business than you. Come on; pull yourself together; snap out of it!

FRED (*head in his hands*). I can't, Kate. I'm all in.

[*Kate never descends to the sentimental, but she is very fond of Fred, almost in love with him. She is concerned at his condition, but tries not to show it. She goes over to him.*]

KATE. Is it Tom Campbell's murder that's still on your mind?

FRED. Yes, I guess it is. Kate, I've got to find out who did it.

KATE. Don't talk nonsense, Fred. You haven't a chance in the world. What do you know about hunting down criminals?

FRED. Not much, I own. Tom made an effort to tell me, though, before he died. Poor devil, the blood choked him when he tried to speak. I'll never forget the look he gave me as he passed out. He knew who shot him and he wanted to tell me.

KATE (*walks over to her desk*). He was a rat, who ever he was.

FRED. Someone was afraid of Tom.

KATE. Yes, though *why* I don't know. He was always a darn sight too generous for his own good, especially to the underdog. A newspaper man shouldn't have a heart; it's a hindrance to his career.

FRED. Sure was in Tom's case. Got a cigarette, Kate?

[*Kate goes round the back of her desk, takes pack from her bag, gives them to Fred who comes downstage.*]

KATE. Yes, here you are, help yourself.

FRED. Thanks!

[*He strikes match, and with shaking hands, attempts to light cigarette.*]

KATE (*jumps up*). Here, you'd better let me light that

STRANGER THAN FICTION

for you. You're likely to set your hair alight with hands shaking like that.

[*Kate lights his cigarette. Smoking, he returns to his own desk and begins carelessly to look over the papers there.*]

FRED. Yes, I've got to do something about it. But some days I feel I just have to go out and get drunk to drown the tap-tapping of his typewriter; it's driving me crazy.

KATE (*looking up quickly from her work*). What typewriter?

FRED (*dejectedly*). Tom's.

KATE (*incredulously*). Do you mean Tom Campbell's?

[*He turns to her with some quickening of tempo, grateful to be unburdening himself of the thing that is bothering him.*]

FRED. Yes. You know that funny way he had of typing, sort of hit and miss style, especially when he had a story to write that he was interested in.

KATE. Yes. Go on.

FRED. Well, when I try to sleep, I hear Tom tapping incessantly on his old machine. Only there is no machine. It's tapping on my brain. (*He jumps up, walks rapidly downstage left, turns back to Kate.*) I tell you, Kate, I've got to drink to get away from it. I believe I'm going nuts.

KATE (*impressed, but trying not to show it*). Don't be a fool, Fred.

FRED (*without moving*). I expected that.

KATE. But — but Fred — imagination can play such tricks.

FRED (*obstinately*). I hear it. (*He turns towards her, speaks quickly.*) I tell you I hear it. I'm not talking about imagination. I'm talking about sound. Actual sound. My ears telling my brain that Tom's trying to get a message through to me . . . (*He goes to his desk, stubs cigarette, sits on the corner of the desk.*) I know they'll chuck me out of this office soon and I don't blame them. I know I'm slipping.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

KATE. Nothing doing. I won't let you slip. (*She goes to him, takes his hat off, sits him at his desk.*) Come on, we've a paper to get out, you know. Look at that sheaf of copy on your desk. You'd better get at it.

FRED (*trying to pull himself together*). You're pretty good to me, Kate.

KATE. I happen to be rather fond of you.

FRED. Tom thought the world of you, and you know how I feel about you. I've tried to tell you often enough.

KATE. Yes, I know. (*Her phone rings.*) "News-Chronicle" editorial, Kate Lundy speaking. Oh, hello, Pat, anything new? (*Over her shoulder to Fred.*) Pat Trimble from the station. Yes, Pat. Thanks, I'll tell him.

FRED. What is it now?

KATE. Pat says they have picked up a suspect for questioning in the Campbell shooting case.

FRED. It's nothing. Just another sop for the public.

KATE. Well, at least give them credit for trying to do something. (*She puts paper in her typewriter. Looks up at Fred. There is concern in her voice.*) Fred, you look ill. What is the matter?

FRED (*loosens his necktie*). Phew! I'm stifling. Wait — there's that damned tapping again. It will drive me crazy. (*He thrusts his hands through his hair and grasps his temples as if to deaden the sound.*) Can't you hear it? Listen . . . (*The following to be given in clipped morse code style on the tip of the tongue.*) Ta ta ta / ta taa ta ta / ta ta / taa taa / . . .

[*Kate has half risen in alarm from her desk. She is leaning across it, looking intently at Fred. Then as the rhythm of the code strikes some cord in her brain, she calls excitedly.*

KATE. Don't stop, Fred! It sounds like a code message. I think I understand. Go on; I'll take it down — it might make sense.

FRED. You mean . . . ?

STRANGER THAN FICTION

KATE. Go on; go on! Quick, while it's with you.

[Fred taps out the message on his desk, and she types each letter tapped out.]

S	L	I	M	/	W	A	L	K	E
R	/	S	H	O	T	/	M	E	/
O	A	T	/	I	N	/	L	O	C
K	E	R	/						

[At the end they both pause.]

KATE. Is that the lot?

FRED. Yes. I can't hear any more. Wait! Here it is again. *(He taps a final dash. Kate types the letter. Pause.)* Finished.

[He folds his arms on his desk, or typewriter; lays his head on them exhausted.]

KATE *(quietly, tensely)*. Thank you, Tom.

FRED *(lifting his head)*. Eh? What did you say?

KATE. I said, "Thank you, Tom."

FRED. Tom?

KATE. I wasn't a girl guide for nothing. Come here and read this.

[She pulls paper from her machine. He reads, slowly, incredulously, taking it in.]

FRED. "Slim Walker shot me. Coat in locker." Kate, what do you make of it?

KATE *(emphatically)*. Exactly what it says. Slim Walker shot Tom Campbell.

FRED. Do you believe that?

KATE. I certainly do.

FRED. What does this mean, "Coat in locker"?

KATE. I don't know, unless it means that cupboard in the corner. Tom used to hide that old leather coat there that I always threatened to burn.

FRED *(goes quickly over to locker)*. The darned thing's locked.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

KATE. I believe I have the key in my desk. (*Finds it in top drawer.*) Yes, here it is; try it.

[*Fred takes key, goes to locker. Kate is upstage center by desk.*

FRED. Yes, it works, and what d'yer know — here's the jacket.

[*He brings it center to Kate.*

KATE. Feel in the pockets.

FRED. Kate, there *is* a letter here.

KATE. Read it.

FRED (*gives Kate the jacket. Opens letter and reads it*).

It's a threatening letter. (*Pause, while he reads further.*) It's from Slim Walker. He says if Tom goes any further with publishing the knowledge he has of the Nettleton Mine Corporation it will be the last thing he will do.

KATE. I always thought Tom had the lowdown on that political tout, that embezzler of public funds. He was ready to expose the full scandal on that phony outfit.

FRED. Some pretty big names involved in that fraud.

KATE. Yes. Tom knew too much, so Walker shot him.

[*Kate takes the coat to her desk and puts it down.*

FRED. Yes, that's what happened. (*He goes to his desk and sits on it.*) I confess I'm a bit dazed. If ever I told anyone *how* I know what I know, I should be put in a strait jacket.

KATE. Or kidded out of town.

FRED. But I *do* believe Slim Walker shot Tom. I've always thought it, and now I'm sure. What do we do now, Kate?

KATE. Do? I'll ring Trimble while you go to the station. They have enough evidence in that letter to arrest Walker on suspicion. (*Fred, a changed man, drops from his desk alertly and puts on his hat.*) And listen, big boy. There'll be no more typewriters tapping on your brain. Tom's given you the clue you were hunting for. It's up to you now to save your job.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

FRED. *Save my job?* They'll make me city editor! This is a scoop, woman. A scoop! (*Looking around.*) Where's my hat?

KATE. On your head.

FRED. So it is. (*He puts the letter in his billfold, strides down to the filing cabinet for his coat.*) Tell them to hold everything; I'm on my way. (*He sweeps across to door, throwing Kate a kiss as he goes; opens the door, shuts it, stands by it.*) Kate.

KATE (*about to dial a number*). Yes?

FRED. What about a snappy little pat about an interesting wedding in newspaper circles?

KATE. Oh, run away. I shall be here for years and years and years.

FRED. You can bet your sweet life you won't. But thanks just the same.

KATE. For what?

FRED (*airily*). Oh, for just being alive. Being yourself. (*He opens the door, goes out, puts his head in again.*) You're a honey, that's what you are, a honey.

KATE (*picking up a book to throw*). Will you go? (*He goes whistling. She smiles to herself, dials a number, waits.*) Lieutenant Trimble there? Hello, Pat. Kate Lundy, "News-Chronicle"—about Tom Campbell's murder. Fred is on his way to you and *this time* you'll be glad to see him.

[*During this, the phone on the other desk rings. The office boy comes in with copy. Kate signs to him to answer the call. He slides to the desk.*]

Curtain

THE CUT-THROAT

**ATTRIBUTED TO
LOPE DE VEGA**

**ADAPTED BY
M. JAGENDORF**

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CAST

THE MAYOR OF BOCEGUILLAS

AN ALDERMAN

TERESA HARAPOS (*The Flesh*)

THE SEXTON QUINOLILLA (*The Lamb*)

FIRST WOMAN (*Envy*)

SECOND WOMAN (*Gluttony*)

THE BARBER (*The Wolf*)

PETER, *his Assistant*

TIME. Early seventeenth-century.

PLACE. Spain.

FOREWORD

It is our regrettable loss that the farces of Lope de Vega are not better known in our language. For there is in them a humor and understanding of human heroism and frailties rich as the sky, a wealth of characters that come from every tone of life and a resourcefulness of plots that mark a great genius of ingenuity. O. Henry did not show a wider gift of story telling than the Spanish playwright in his shorter masterpieces.

He wrote about twenty-two hundred plays in all, and here is just one dart from the vast workshop of his mind.

The *Cut-Throat* shows de Vega's quickness of thought and neatness of plot construction. It has what Professor Brander Matthews liked to call a perfect plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Character and incidents fit one another with the perfection of a well-cut diamond.

The production is very simple. If you have not a square set and a regular theatre, you can create both these by two, three, or four panel screens set in the room where the play will be produced. The screen to the right should have a stone wall painted on it and a door leading in to the street. Paint the door near the edge of the screen so that actors coming in from behind the screen and going out that way will give the appearance of coming and going through the door. On the back screen, painted trees, or perhaps a well, will give the impression of a courtyard in a Spanish town. The screens on the other side should have the door leading in to the Barber's house.

Or the court scene might be copied from a painting by some Spanish artist. Look through reproductions of Spanish masterpieces and they will not only give you the scene you wish but will also stimulate in your mind the feeling of the story and the people of the play.

THE CUT-THROAT

The costumes will be found in these reproductions of famous paintings. De Vega lived from 1562 to 1635, and the characters in the *Cut-Throat* are such as he knew well.

If you have someone in your group who can play some Spanish folk tunes before and after the play, it will add both to the enjoyment and atmosphere of the productions.

M. JAGENDORF

THE CUT-THROAT

The scene shows the courtyard, the house of the Barber located on one side and Teresa's stall on the other. The courtyard is cut off from the street by a wall in which is a door leading to the street. Several stools or chairs stand before the door of the Barber. There is a bench before Teresa's stall.

When the curtain rises, it shows Teresa, a big, coarse market woman running after the Mayor with a drawn dagger. The latter is very fat, and while running around dodging Teresa's menacing attacks, he is chewing a turnip he holds in one hand. Following the two, at the same pace, is the Alderman, who apparently is trying to establish peace.

TERESA. Oh, I . . . I . . . a poor weak woman, Officer! I have to fight this accursed tyrant, this Mayor! May God Help me! Alderman, don't stop me; help me catch him. Punish him! If I get 'm, I'll tear out his eyes. I'll spit in his face.

MAYOR (*getting behind the bench in front of the stall*).
Woman, show respect for the law!
[*He has gotten hold of her hand.*

ALDERMAN. Teresa, stop! Control yourself.

TERESA (*turning to him*). I'll not control myself. I'll crawl on bare knees to court to accuse this thief . . . this . . .

ALDERMAN. Stop talking like that. Are you crazy?

TERESA. I'll denounce this robber with my dying breath.

MAYOR. Listen to that crazy jabbering!

TERESA. My ghost'll cry through the city 'till I see him kicked out of the Mayor's seat.

MAYOR. Be silent, Teresa Harapos, spare your last breath.

THE CUT-THROAT

TERESA. I'll move heaven and earth to see him driven out.
I'll see that we get a new Mayor at Boceguillas.

ALDERMAN. For heaven's sake, hold your breath, Teresa,
and tell me what it's all about.

MAYOR. I just came to her stall to examine the goods she
sells, and to levy the proper tax, — that's my duty as
Mayor. I wanted to look over her vegetables and see
that they are fresh, and so I tasted about . . . two hun-
dred turnips, more or less.

ALDERMAN. What! You ate two hundred turnips! Do
I hear right?

MAYOR. That wasn't so many. Do you think they will
do me harm?

TERESA. That wasn't all, Alderman. You know what
they say: after the turnips comes the cheese. After the
two hundred turnips he stole enough bread and cheese to
feed six mule drivers. He ate . . . six blocks of cheese
and . . . six loaves of bread.

ALDERMAN. Woman! What are you saying? Saint
Blas!

[*Crosses himself.*]

MAYOR. Why, by Saint Bruno! Why all this fuss!
That's just a little breakfast.

TERESA. I am not through yet, Alderman. He went in
the chicken coop and drank . . . forty raw eggs.

ALDERMAN. Jesu-Christo! Forty, did you say!

MAYOR. She lies. There were eighty. Now don't start
weeping all over again about it.

ALDERMAN. Are you a wild beast?

MAYOR (*innocently*). Why? Do wild beasts eat raw
eggs?

TERESA (*weeping*). All I had! It's gone! In one sweep
he ate up all my profit.

MAYOR. All I can say to you, woman, and to you, *señor*
Alderman, is: I only did my duty. No one can reproach
me for that.

TERESA. Father in heaven!

THE CUT-THROAT

ALDERMAN. Holy Lord! Duty! A wicked fiend must sit in your stomach who eats all that. You couldn't do it alone.

MAYOR. Do you really think so?

ALDERMAN. I certainly do. There sure sits a devil inside of you.

MAYOR. No . . . let me see. No, it can't be. Wait . . . eighty eggs; six squares of cheese; six loaves of bread; two hundred turnips . . . Was there anything else, Teresa?

TERESA. No! Isn't that enough?

MAYOR. If that's all, then why all the excitement?

ALDERMAN (*seriously and emphatically*). Holy Father! Now I'm sure that the arch fiend with his long claws and red tail sits in your stomach. You don't consider that much? Mayor, we must save you. We must call the Sexton Quinolilla to drive the devil out of you.

TERESA. That's right. No man could eat all that and think it's not much.

MAYOR (*looking from one to the other*). Well, if you really think so . . .

ALDERMAN. Ho there, Sexton Quinolilla, quickly! Come here to exorcise a devil of avarice who dwells in our good Mayor. (*There is a noise of some one coming.*) Quick, good Sexton Quinolilla.

[*The Sexton Quinolilla rushes in from the street entrance with hyssop and caldron.*]

QUINOLILLA. What is it? What is it?

ALDERMAN. Good Sexton, there's a black devil in the mayor which makes him take things from poor people. Please drive him into the deepest hell. I mean the devil.

QUINOLILLA. Oh! I know the devil in our mayor well enough and I'll sure drive him out. (*He places himself right in front of the Mayor, speaking in a sing-song, solemn manner, with overemphasized gestures.*)

I conjure you, belly-worshipping, poor-box robbing Mayor,

THE CUT-THROAT

You living tomb of stews!
You Herod of chicken coops!
You fiendish dragon who engulfs and devours
Fat round sausages,
And sewers of litres and quarts of wine!
You terrible wrecker of breakfasts and dinners!
You greedy destroyer of everything eatable!
You who are diseased with noon meals and night meals!
Conjuramini me cumilonorum.

Fugite Saeculorum.

[*He douses him with a spray of water from a cauldron.*

MAYOR (*leaping back*). You starched female lizard! So you insult me in Latin! Ay! *culorum* on me? You slimy eel with a black snout! You distaff with a horse tail. You last worm on earth. You flea with a hyssop. So you insult me in Latin!

TERESA. Listen to the fool blaspheming. He should be burnt for it.

ALDERMAN. He has not insulted you. You are *cumilonorum*.

MAYOR. The offense isn't in the *cumilonorum*.

ALDERMAN. Then where is the insult?

MAYOR. In the *culorum*.

FIRST WOMAN (*rushing in from the street door*). Teresa! Alderman! Have you forgotten? Don't you know that you have to come to rehearsal of the Corpus Christi play at the Barber's who is directing it?

[*Runs into Barber's house.*

ALDERMAN. Sure, we know.

SECOND WOMAN (*rushing in from the Barber's door*). Are you still here? And this is the day before Corpus Christi. The Barber is on pins and needles waiting for us. He is very angry, and you know he is preparing a wonderful feast for us players. He wants us to get through quickly with the rehearsal so we can get at the fine food.

[*Goes into Barber's house.*

THE CUT-THROAT

MAYOR. What, fine food?

QUINOLILLA. A fine meal! I'm going at once.

[He rushes into the Barber's door.]

MAYOR. Did I hear a fine meal?

TERESA. The finest and biggest that was ever served in our town.

ALDERMAN. Come, Teresa, let us go to the rehearsal and the feast.

TERESA. Yes, let us go to the rehearsal and the wonderful feast. I'll wait with my law suit until after the meal. I'll fix that dog of a Mayor for eating all my food.

[They bow to each other with polite sarcasm, and Teresa goes into the Barber's house.]

MAYOR. What! A feast! And I not present! That'll kill me. Lord! I'm dying just thinking about it! But going without being invited isn't the proper thing for a Mayor. Oh . . . a dinner without me! Lord! I shudder even when I think of it. Heaven preserve me! Under what pretext could I go there? Oh, I've an idea. I'll go to the Barber's for a shave, and while he is working on me it'll be dinner time, and I'll have to be invited. I'm the Mayor! He'll have to say to me: kindly stay, I beg you to have dinner with us. And I won't wait for too much pleading. I'll accept quickly, seat myself at the head of the table and come in for the fine feast. Ha, ha, ha, no one will ever guess how I arranged the little scheme. Ha, ha, but first I'll go and take a peep to see how my own dinner is getting along.

[He goes out. When he is gone the Barber, Peter, who is the Barber's Assistant, the Alderman, Teresa, the two women, and the Sexton Quinolilla come into the courtyard from the door of the Barber's house.]

BARBER. Come, señores, into this courtyard. There is much more room and it is much cooler.

BARBER'S HELPER. Let us begin the auto.

TERESA. Who'll prompt?

ALDERMAN. I've got the book. I'll do it.

THE CUT-THROAT

[*They arrange themselves in a semi-circle. As they do so, the Mayor rushes in. There is great consternation and they fall out of line.*]

MAYOR. Ho there, maestro! What do you say to shaving me right this very minute?

BARBER. Right this very minute?

FIRST WOMAN. Devil! It's the Mayor! He's here for the dinner. When he's through, there won't be a meal left for any of us.

SECOND WOMAN. There won't be a meal for one of us, you said? There won't be a crumb for a starving bird.

BARBER (*aside to the crowd*). Sh . . . don't be afraid; I have an idea! I've just thought of a little joke I'll play on him; he won't forget for a long time. He'll watch us eat and won't be able to take a morsel in his mouth.

MAYOR. Come, isn't there anyone here to shave me?

BARBER. Certainly, Mayor, certainly. You have arrived just in the nick of time (*Full of meaning.*) if you are willing to take a chance.

MAYOR. I'll be pleased indeed . . . with pleasure. At a fine table there is always room for one more mouth. And to save you the trouble of begging me any more, you can start the dinner right now.

BARBER. No, let them rehearse first, while you are shaved.

MAYOR. Very well, let them go ahead with the play, but quickly. I have been invited to six other dinners besides this one.

[*Barber whispers something to his Assistant.*]

BARBER. You understand?

BARBER'S ASSISTANT. I certainly do.

[*He goes out for a second and returns with a napkin and a box of razors and two basins. One of them is covered, but the other is open and full of soap suds. While he is out, the Barber places a stool in the center of the stage towards the fore, and the Mayor sits on it. The Barber's Assistant places the napkin under the Mayor's chin and commences to lather his face.*]

THE CUT-THROAT

BARBER. Now you others, to work.

[*They place themselves again in a semi-circle.*]

ALDERMAN. Very well, Envy, you enter.

FIRST WOMAN (*stepping forward*). That's me.

ALDERMAN. Gluttony enters.

SECOND WOMAN (*stepping forward*). I play that part.

ALDERMAN. The Flesh enters.

TERESA (*stepping forward*). That is me.

MAYOR (*who is now covered with soap, jumping up*).

Flesh, did I hear? Are we going to eat now?

TERESA. I'm doing the part of the Flesh.

MAYOR. And I want to do away with it.

BARBER'S ASSISTANT. Sit down, I tell you. I'm ready to shave you now.

[*Mayor sits, and Peter begins to shave him.*]

ALDERMAN. The Lamb and the Wolf.

BARBER. I am playing the part of the Wolf.

MAYOR. You, Barber?

BARBER. Yes, I.

MAYOR. Are you playing the part or acting it? Ho, ho, ho.

QUINOLILLA. I am playing the part of the Lamb, and I begin. (*He addresses himself to the Barber, speaking in a very stylized heroic manner.*) Monstrous Wolf, let go of me.

BARBER (*getting hold of the Mayor's hair as if to see if Peter is doing his work well, and speaking in the same tone*). Let go of you? Do you think I am a fool.

MAYOR (*pointing to Quinolilla*). This is the Lamb. You've got the wrong one.

QUINOLILLA. Be still! Don't interrupt us.

MAYOR. By the Pope's mule! Were I the Wolf, I'd not waste a tooth on that kind of a Lamb.

[*All are angry at the interruption.*]

FIRST WOMAN (*to the Mayor*). You . . . you . . . you could be the model for all the characters. You are Envy's very mouthpiece.

THE CUT-THROAT

SECOND WOMAN. Gluttony is your middle name.

TERESA. And so is Flesh.

[*She makes a threatening gesture towards him.*]

MAYOR. She is the villain. She is crazy and doesn't know what she is doing. Do you know what you are playing?

BARBER'S ASSISTANT (*to the Mayor*). You keep on jumping around, and in a moment the razor'll cut your head from your shoulders. Will you be quiet, Mayor?

MAYOR. No, I won't be. I must show you people how verses should be recited. (*He rises and declaims with exaggerated comic gestures.*)

Long live the Lords who gather the wealth of the earth!

For others I bear no respect,

And thus I'll think to my dying days.

As for you, you are ever in judgment lacking.

What strangeness, what madness,

Incites you to wild deeds of rebellion!

What fury makes you rush thus?

Are you perchance bereft of mind?

But let me continue with

The narration of my tale, —

A small pebble

Often fells a great giant . . .

That is how verses should be read.

[*He sits down.*]

ALL (*clapping their hands and making faces*). Bravo!

Bravo! Spoken like a bully and a Mayor.

BARBER'S ASSISTANT. Bravo! Bravo, Mayor, but I warn you if you don't stay still, I may slash your neck and behead you accidentally.

MAYOR. And I, good fellow, will have your neck cut deliberately.

ALDERMAN. Let us continue, or we'll never get done.

FIRST WOMAN (*Envy*). Mercy, O Lord!

QUINOLILLA (*Lamb*). Envy, what do you seek?

FIRST WOMAN (*Envy*). I want to enter your body.

QUINOLILLA (*Lamb*).

THE CUT-THROAT

Into my body?

Even though you are thick as a barrel

And I thin as a dry bean?

MAYOR. Crazy gibber-jabber.

[As he says these words, concentrating his attention on the actors, the Barber's Assistant has quickly taken from the covered basin on the floor a sponge with blood, and presses it with a swift motion tight against that part of the Mayor's neck that he was shaving.]

BARBER'S ASSISTANT (*shouting*). Lord! Father! Help!

BARBER. What've you done?

MAYOR. Jesu-Christo! He has murdered me!

ALDERMAN. He has cut your throat! Father in heaven!

BARBER. Bandages! Quick! Two eggs!

[He puts his hand over the sponge, and the Barber's Assistant rushes from the room for a second and returns with the requested articles. The Barber immediately commences to cover the Mayor's neck with bandages.]

SECOND WOMAN (*to Barber's Assistant*). Peter, you had better make yourself scarce. He may die.

BARBER'S ASSISTANT. I'll run! I'll fly!

BARBER. Tell everyone the sad news, — that the Mayor is dying.

[He continues bandaging the Mayor's face until only his mouth and eyes are visible.]

QUINOLILLA (*helping the Barber to some more bandage*). Here are some more.

MAYOR (*speaking thickly through the bandages*). Am I badly hurt?

BARBER. You are bleeding to death.

MAYOR. O Lord, save me! O Señor Sanctus Dominus Deos! Save me as you saved Daniel from the lion's den.

TERESA (*trying to hide her laughter*). I can't look at this any longer. I must leave.

[She goes out quickly, holding her apron over her face.]

MAYOR. Curses! Do you think I want to see it?

THE CUT-THROAT

BARBER. O horrors! That such a thing should have happened in my house!

MAYOR. O worse horrors! That it should have happened to my throat! My throat is surely more important than your house.

QUINOLILLA. I'll prepare the funeral. What kind shall it be? Tell me.

MAYOR. Tell you? I'll tell you something else: may the worms eat your flesh for saying such things.

BARBER. You mustn't excite yourself. You must be quiet, Mayor. For at least seven hours you must not move your throat a single hair's breadth.

MAYOR. Why should I move my throat?

BARBER. I see you forgot. We are going to the feast, and you were invited to it.

ALDERMAN. Come, let us start. I smell delicious food, and I am hungry.

MAYOR. May you choke on it! And I . . .

BARBER. You must not touch a crumb . . . because of your cut throat.

MAYOR. I am not to eat anything at all? Nothing?

BARBER. Not even in your imagination, lest you disturb your throat and make the blood flow too strongly.

[They walk off, laughing pleasantly.]

MAYOR (*groaning*). O Father in heaven! O you women who bear children who will some day become Mayors like me, and who will have their throats cut just like me, be sure you teach them not to have any appetite. (*There is a noise of clattering of plates inside.*) What . . . plates clattering! Mother of Mary! I hear it. I am sure. (*Quinolilla comes out of the door to the right, carrying a steaming hot platter.*) Ho there, Quinolilla, what is that? What are you carrying?

QUINOLILLA. Chickens.

MAYOR. And I . . . ?

QUINOLILLA. You? You'll learn the meaning of temperance.

THE CUT-THROAT

MAYOR. Why? Is this a feast day that I must practice temperance?

[*Quinolilla walks back in the house. Others, with dishes and plates, come out. They walk right in front of the Mayor, bowing pleasantly to him.*]

MAYOR. What are you carrying?

FIRST WOMAN. Rashers of crisp bacon.

ALDERMAN. Young rabbits with capers.

SECOND WOMAN. Soup and stuffed pigeons.

[*The Barber and his assistant come out with glasses.*]

BARBER (*holding a glass high*). A toast.

BARBER'S ASSISTANT (*raising his glass high*). A toast.

BARBER. To the finest food and the finest feast we have ever had in our life.

[*They clink their glasses, drink, and all return into the house.*]

MAYOR. Heaven! How they are tormenting me with this dinner! What a tempting odor! I am dying. I'm dying . . . from hunger more than from my wound.

QUINOLILLA (*enters with two plates, one with a dried grape and the other with a dried almond*). Ho there, Mayor, I've brought you some fine food. The Barber said you could eat something by now without fear of dying.

MAYOR. O voice of an Angel! What did you bring me?

QUINOLILLA. Little in weight but much in nourishment. One raisin and one almond.

MAYOR. The fiends, curses on your bones! Am I a puppy that is to be kept from growing?

QUINOLILLA. Come, eat.

[*Holding the raisin to his mouth.*]

MAYOR. You may thank my serious wound that I am not tearing you to pieces right now, instead.

BARBER (*as the rest come out*). How do you feel, *señor* Mayor?

MAYOR. How are you, maestro? As for me, I am terribly sick . . . but my appetite is that of a very healthy man.

BARBER. I want to look at the wound.

THE CUT-THROAT

[Commences to remove the bandages from the Mayor's face and throat.

MAYOR. How is the wound?

BARBER. Gone.

MAYOR. Gone?

BARBER. Pho . . . ! Flew away like little birdies, while we were eating.

CROWD. Everything . . . passed away . . . while we were eating. There is no wound! There never was a wound.

MAYOR (*suddenly realizing the trick that has been played on him*). You guzzling beasts! Yelping hyenas, keeping from me that which I always take.

QUINOLILLA. He ate his own wound away, while we were eating.

MAYOR. What will you say if I eat you tooth and nail?
[*They all arrange themselves in a semi-circle.*]

QUINOLILLA (*singing and laughing hard. As the song progresses he laughs harder and harder*).

The Mayor came all ready and set,
To devour the dinner we had spread,
But — the host and guests ate it instead.

MAYOR.

I came all dressed like any man,
To play the fox amongst chicken and hen,
Quinolilla, Quinolilla, Quinolilla — len.

Hey! Stop that silly song,
For I'll drive you all from the town
As easy as a poet throws off a couplet.
(*In sing-song, stilted manner.*)

You've had your day,
But don't feel so gay,
For soon you'll pay
For *Lèse majesté*.

I am the Mayor of this here town.
I'll call my trustees with majestic frown.
I'll order them loud to shoot you down.

THE CUT-THROAT

ALL (*in the same fashion*).

But kind sweet Mayor of our fine town,
Strutting with your club and official gown,
Try as you may all of your wiles,
We'll fight you with wit and kill you with smiles.
To gain our victory we need no club,
'Gainst worship of belly and mind hollow's a tub.
Thus Dumbness, Avarice and Tyranny fare,
Take heed, don't follow'm, think and beware.

Curtain

DEATH AT FREDERICKSBURG

By

EDGAR R. EMERY

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CAST

SIMEON GEYER, *a farmer*

HANNAH GEYER, *his wife*

LUKE PUTNAM

NELL, *a young girl*

SHOHN DRUM, *a stranger*

TIME. 1874.

PLACE. A farmhouse in the Susquehanna Valley of Pennsylvania.

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The living room of a farmhouse in the Susquehanna Valley of Pennsylvania in the year 1874. The thick stone walls are roughly plastered and whitewashed. Overhead can be seen the great unplanned beams which support the low ceiling. Backstage center is a door leading to the outside, with wrought iron hinges and a massive bolt. On either side of it are small windows with deep sills, curtained in checked gingham. A door, downstage left, leads to the kitchen. Upstage left are stairs to the second floor. In the big stone fireplace, right, a log fire is blazing. Facing it, sit Simeon Geyer, a stringy-looking farmer of middle age, and his wife, Hannah. Simeon smokes his pipe placidly and stares into the fire, while Hannah knits busily with her great bone needles. At a table, left of center, his head on his hand, sits Luke Putnam. His eyes are closed, and he is breathing heavily. From time to time his body jerks and his face twitches in his sleep. Sitting near him on the floor, and watching him, is Nell, a young girl of about twelve. In her lap is a kitten which she strokes absently.

Night has fallen, and a high wind can be heard howling in the chimney and whistling about the corners of the house.

HANNAH. Wind 'pears ter be a-risin', Simeon.

SIMEON. Ayeh, reckon 'tull snow afore mornin'.

HANNAH. Stock won't freeze none, will thuh?

SIMEON. Reckon not. Thim critturs knows how ter bed down warm agin each other. Sides, barn don't leak much since Luke'n me fixed it.

HANNAH. Ain't no night ter be out o' doors. A body ud freeze ter death.

SIMEON. Been a bad winter a'right. Ain't been ez mean a one since the blizzard o' sixty — er wuz it sixty-one? Leastways not since afore the War.

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[Luke moans in his sleep. His face twists as if in pain and his body rocks restlessly. At the sound, Simeon and Hannah stare at him in mingled awe and surprise.]

SIMEON (*in almost a whisper*). Wal, I swan! Fust time I ever seed thet. 'Peared like he cud never git ter sleep afore mornin'.

HANNAH. Ayeh, whin proper folks wuz a-wukin'.

SIMEON. Ain't his fault. Reckon ther's sumpin' jes' won't let him sleep none nights.

HANNAH. Sumpin' evil he done, thet's whut 'tis. Sumpin' won't give him no peace.

SIMEON. Luke's a good man, Hannah. Ye orter know thet arter whut he done.

HANNAH. Mebbe.

[Luke, his eyes wide with terror, leaps suddenly to his feet, shoving back the chair. Then he doubles over in pain and sits down heavily.]

SIMEON (*going to him quickly*). Luke!

HANNAH. Got another o' his spells, I reckon.

[Simeon shakes Luke, then fumbles through his pockets.]

SIMEON. Luke! Luke! Whur's thim pills Doc McCallister give him ter take?

[He finds the small bottle of pills, as Luke begins to stir.]

LUKE (*half conscious*). No! No! Christ, no!

SIMEON (*shaking him*). Luke!

LUKE (*opening his eyes*). Simeon — Nell.

SIMEON. Ye a'right now, Luke?

LUKE. Ayeh, reckon so. Musta dozed off.

SIMEON (*holding out bottle*). Ye better take these here, Luke.

LUKE (*pushing his hand away*). Don't give me none o' thim.

SIMEON. It's whut Doc McCallister give ye ter take, Luke. 'Tull make ye sleep.

LUKE. I got ter stay awake, er 'tull come back agin. Ud kill me ifen it come back agin ternight.

SIMEON. Whut ud come back, Luke?

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LUKE (*getting slowly to his feet*). Sumpin' I reckon ye wouldn't onderstand, Simeon.

HANNAH (*who has resumed her knitting*). Bad dreams, thet's whut 'tis. Dreams thet come in the night ter trouble an oneasy mind. Been a long time since ye slep' peaceful nights, ain't it, Luke?

LUKE (*stares at her, then turns to Nell*). Nell, run up an' light the lamps, will ye, child?

NELL. Ayeh, Luke.

[*She goes upstairs with the kitten in her arms.*]

HANNAH. Ain't no call fir ye ter burn four lamps all night, Luke. Coal oil's mighty dear. One orter be a-plenty.

SIMEON. Now, Hannah, I reckon it's Luke's oil ter burn as he sees fittin'. He paid fir it. Our'n, too.

HANNAH. Coal oil ain't vittles. He ain't paid fir none o' thim.

SIMEON. Ain't none o' yer business whut Luke pays fir, Hannah.

HANNAH (*muttering*). Ain't nothin' my business. Nothin' 'ceptin' wuk.

LUKE. Hannah's right, Simeon. I don't aim ter be no burden ter ye.

SIMEON. Ye ain't no burden, Luke. Reckon ther's little 'nough we kin do ter pay ye fir savin' Nell like ye done.

LUKE. Ye don't owe me nothin' fir thet, Simeon. I jes' happened ter see it all. Any man ud done the same.

SIMEON. Nubuddy 'ceptin' a mighty brave un ud done thet. I seed too many loggers crushed ter death not ter know ther ain't a man in ten ez ud jump inter a ragin' flume ter save his own maw from bein' kilt, let alone a kid he ain't never set eyes on afore.

LUKE. I ain't brave, Simeon. God knows I ain't.

SIMEON. Any man ez done whut ye done kin stay here ez long's he's a mind ter, an' welcome. Ain't much I got ter give.

LUKE. Ye been mighty kind ter me, Simeon, an' I thank ye. Fust time I settled down fir more'n a month er so in

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over twelve year. But I can't stay here no more. I got ter go.

SIMEON. Why, Luke? Ye got a hum here.

LUKE. I dunno. Never cud bear ter stay in one spot fir long. Hed the feelin' I orter be movin' along fir quite a spell now. It's been a-growin' in me.

HANNAH. If Luke's a mind ter go, Simeon, we hadn't ought ter keep him agin his will.

SIMEON. But ye ain't well, Luke. Doc McCallister sez ez how yer a sick man.

LUKE. Mebbe so. Anyways, ain't nothin' he kin do ter he'p me. Ain't nothin' nubuddy kin do.

SIMEON. But whur'll ye go? Ye got some kinfolk ye kin go ter?

LUKE. Nup, they's all dead now, I guess. Wouldn't make no diff'rence if they wuzn't — they wouldn't know me no more. 'Sides, I couldn't never go back ther'.

SIMEON. But ye got ter hev a place ter crawl inter nights, a place whur ye kin git some grub.

LUKE. Reckon I kin git thim. Folks is allus lookin' fir somebuddy ter do odd jobs.

SIMEON. Whut d'ye do afore ye come here, Luke?

LUKE. Nothin'. Jes' wandered.

SIMEON. Twelve year be a long time ter wander.

LUKE. Ayeh, mighty long. Seems like twicet thet. Reckon ther' ain't many places I ain't been ter. Hed a chancet once ter strike it rich in Californy 'bout seven year ago. Sold muh claim, though, an' lit out arter six month.

SIMEON. How come ye never settled down?

LUKE. I dunno. Somepin' allus seemed ter keep drivin' me on.

SIMEON. Allus figured a man ain't happy unless he kin kinda dig his roots inter sumpin'. Ain't ye never wisht ye hed a woman, an' a kid er two, an' mebbe a piece o' lan' ye cud kind o' grow inter? Ain't ye never wisht fir thim?

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LUKE. Wisht fir 'em? I'da sold muh soul for 'em, ifen I hed a soul wu'th sellin'!

HANNAH. Even the devil ain't got no use fir some souls, I reckon.

LUKE. Ther' was a girl oncet, an' a piece o' lan', too. They wuz a-waitin' fir me ter come back.

SIMEON. Mebbe they's still a-waitin', Luke.

LUKE. They got tared o' waitin'. The girl's married an' the lan's sol'. Even ifen they wuzn't, reckon I coul'n't bear ter face 'em.

[Nell comes down.]

NELL. They's all lit, Luke.

LUKE. Thank ye, Nell. Reckon I'll be a-leavin' ter-morrer, Simeon.

SIMEON. Wisht ye'd change yer mind, Luke.

[Luke lights a lamp on the table, picks it up, and goes toward the stairs.]

NELL (*timidly*). Luke?

LUKE. Ayeh, Nell?

NELL. Do you like cats?

LUKE (*puzzled*). Why, reckon I do, Nell. All 'ceptin' wildcats an' pant'ers, thet is. Ain't got no use fir thim.

NELL (*holding up kitten*). Do you like Peter?

LUKE. Ayeh, Nell, he's a right nice little feller.

NELL (*impulsively*). Here, you kin hev him.

LUKE. Wal, now, thet's right kind o' ye, Nell, but he's a pet o' your'n. I wouldn't want ter take him from ye.

NELL. I don't mind, ifen ye'd like ter hev him.

LUKE. But I ain't got no use fir no cat, Nell.

NELL. He's awful nice.

SIMEON. Luke don't want yer durned cat nohow, Nell. Now hesh up.

NELL. Ayeh, paw. I wuz only a-thinkin' ez how mebbe Peter cud keep Luke comp'ny nights, so's he wouldn't be so lonely.

LUKE. I, I wisht . . .

[He turns quickly, and goes up the stairs. Simeon re-

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sumes his seat by the fire and relights his pipe. Nell sits down again on the floor with her kitten, and appears to be listening intently. Presently, from overhead, comes the sound of heavy boots pacing on creaking boards in an unbroken, monotonous rhythm. One-two-three-four. Pause. One-two-three-four. Only Nell pays any attention to the sound.

HANNAH (*cautiously*). Ye still figgerin' on buyin' thet piece o' lan' from Hank McNeill?

SIMEON. Nup.

HANNAH. Somebuddy git it fust?

SIMEON. Nup.

HANNAH. Whyn't ye git it thin, Simeon?

SIMEON. Ain't got thutty dullar.

HANNAH. It's good lan'. Ain't none better in the hull valley. Ye cud set out a sight more crops.

SIMEON. Durn it, Hannah, ye think I don't know thet? Ye think I wouldn't git it ifen I cud? Now shet up 'bout it.

[There is a considerable pause, while Hannah thinks up a different approach.]

HANNAH. Sarah Kuhns wuz sayin' Sunday ez how Lou Schaeffer's takin' on six new men, come Tuesday a week.

SIMEON. Lou's doin' might fine, I reckon. Rate he's a-goin', ain't goin' ter be a tree left on Big Run in 'bout a year er two.

HANNAH. Sarah sez ez how Lou don't know whur he's a-goin' ter put 'em up at, whut with eve'y farmhouse hereabouts nigh onter full up. She's a-boardin' three herself, she sez, an' can't take no more.

SIMEON. Whut ye aimin' at, Hannah?

HANNAH (*hesitantly*). We cud put some o' 'em up here, Simeon.

SIMEON. Thet's whut I thought ye wuz gittin' ter.

HANNAH (*eagerly*). We cud put up two, mebbe three, 'thout costin' us much, an' Sarah sez they pay a dullar

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a week apiece. With all o' thet comin' in stiddy eve'y week — two, three dullar — wouldn't take no more'n a couple o' months till ye cud buy thet piece o' lan' ye been a-hankerin' fir, Simeon.

SIMEON. Ye know ain't nubuddy a-goin' ter stay here. Ain't nubuddy 'round these parts ez ud sleep under the same ruf with Luke. They's all a-scairt o' him, think he's crazy er in cahoots with the devil. 'Sides, Luke don't take ter strangers nohow. Ye know thet.

HANNAH. But ifen Luke's a-leavin' like he said he wuz . . .

SIMEON. On'y reason he said thet wuz cuz o' yer sharp tongue. Luke ain't a-leavin' less'n he's a mind ter, an' thet's thet.

HANNAH (*defiantly*). Ayeh, thet's thet. Don' make no diff'rence 'bout me, 'bout whut I feel, do it? I kin jes' keep on lyin' 'wake nights, whilst ye go ter sleep, a-hearin' him trompin' up'n'down, mutterin' ter hisself, an' a-prayin' fir mornin' ter come. Thet don' make no diff'rence ter ye, long's I wuk an' cook yer meals, do it? I kin jes' keep on a-goin' like o' thet 'tull I go plumb crazy muhself. I wisht ter God he'd die!

SIMEON. Shet yer wicked talk, Hannah! How kin ye say such thin's?

HANNAH (*continuing*). Nigh onter a year an' a half he's been a-livin' here, an' eve'y night the same thin' over. I tell ye I can't abide much more o' it.

NELL (*who has been listening with interest*). Luke don' mean no harm, maw. Luke's a nice man.

SIMEON. Mebbe ye won't hev ter stand much more o' it, Hannah. Doc McCallister sez 'twouldn't s'prize him none ifen we wuz ter wake up some mornin' an' fin' him daid. It ain't jes' his body is sick, neither. Don' know what 'tis, but ther's sumpin' gnawin' deep inside him, an' he's lonely an' scairt. It ain't good fir a sick man ter be all alone, an' it ain't Christian not ter take him in an' do whut ye kin fir him.

[*The matter is at an end, and each resumes his own*

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thoughts. Whatever they may be, they are interrupted by a knock at the door.

SIMEON. Wonder who thet be a-v'yagin' late on a night like o' this?

HANNAH. Don' ye open the door, Simeon. Ain't no tellin' who it might be.

SIMEON (*getting up*). Reckon it ain't nubuddy meanin' no harm.

[He goes to the door and opens it, as a gust of wind and snow sweeps in. A short man, very round, stands revealed in the doorway, looking for all the world like a human apple. A black fiddle case is tucked under his arm.]

STRANGER. May I coom in, please?

SIMEON. Ayeh, reckon ye kin.

[The Stranger steps inside, and Simeon shuts the door.]

STRANGER (*shaking the snow from his coat, and looking around*). Ah, vot a cosy room!

SIMEON. Whut ye want, stranger?

STRANGER. I vunder could shoo bossibly gif me a nighd's lotching?

SIMEON. Wal, I don' know. We ain't got no room fir ye, stranger.

STRANGER. Uf course I vould gladly bay . . .

HANNAH. He cud sleep down here, ifen he'da mind ter, Simeon. Thet wouldn't make no difference.

SIMEON. Ayeh, ye cud stretch yerself in front o' the fire ifen ye wanted, stranger. On'y I reckon thet ud be a mite oncomf'table.

STRANGER. Dot vould pe fine.

SIMEON. Wal, yer right welcome thin. Make yerself ter hum. Hannah, take the stranger's coat.

STRANGER. T'ank you.

[He takes off his hat and coat, and Hannah hangs them on a peg by the fire to dry.]

STRANGER. Bermit me to introduce mineself. Trum's te name — Old Shohn Trum, te fittler.

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SIMEON. Muh name's Simeon Geyer. This here's muh wife, Hannah.

DRUM (*bowing corpulently*). Frau Geyer. A bleasure.

SIMEON. An' thet's muh datter, Nell.

DRUM. Vot a bretty chilt, und vot a bretty name.

SIMEON. Hannah, git the jug. I reckon the stranger cud use a snort er two ter warm his bones.

[*Hannah crosses and goes out left. Drum warms himself before the fire.*]

DRUM. Py golly, vot a nighd!

SIMEON. Whur ye boun' fir, stranger?

DRUM. I vas on my way to Derrstown when te storm ofer-took me. Id vas shnowin' like te deffil, und te vind vas so shtrong dot I t'ought I vas going to plow righd away, und when I saw t'is house, I said berhabs t'ouse goot beoble vill led me shtay t'ere for te nighd.

SIMEON. Ye travelled fir?

DRUM. All te vay from Reading.

SIMEON. A fiddler ye say ye wuz?

DRUM. Dod's righd — idinerand fittler.

SIMEON. Ye fiddle fir dances an' sich like?

DRUM. I blay vherefer I am needed.

SIMEON. Ye keep busy?

DRUM (*smiling*). I am te pusiest fittler in te world.

SIMEON. D'ye come 'round these parts often?

DRUM. Chess, quide often. Uf course I blay te mosd in te cidies.

SIMEON. Ayeh, I reckon ther's more folks ther' ez dance.

DRUM. Quide so.

[*Hannah brings in the jug, and puts it on the table.*]

SIMEON. He'p yerself, stranger.

DRUM. T'ank you.

[*He lifts the jug from the table to his shoulder, takes a deep breath, and starts drinking. The bottom of the jug goes higher and higher, his cheeks grow redder and redder, and still Old John drinks on, until even Simeon gapes in awe. At last he puts the jug down, smacking his lips.*]

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DRUM. Ah! Py golly, t'ere's nutting like a goot swallow
uf schnapps to varm te insides and vet te vhistle! Und
now, how vould shoo like a little music in bayment for
your hosbitality, eh?

NELL. Oh, yes!

SIMEON. Wal, thet ud be mighty fine, stranger, on'y I
reckon it's gittin' kinda late.

HANNAH. We ain't heerd no music hereabouts fir quite a
spell, Simeon.

NELL. Please, paw?

SIMEON. Wal, reckon a minit er two won't make no dif-
f'rence in the mornin'.

DRUM (*opening his fiddle case*). Vhat vould shoo like me
to blay?

SIMEON. D'ye know "Sourwood Mountain," stranger?

DRUM. Shoo mean te vun vot goes . . .

[*He whistles the opening bars.*]

SIMEON. Ayeh, thet's it.

[*Drum quickly tunes the fiddle, then sits on the table, his short legs dangling over the edge, and starts to play. He begins moderately, then gradually quickens the tempo, all the while beaming and keeping time to the rhythm with his body. Soon Hannah, then Simeon, too, begin to sway to the lively tune.*]

DRUM. Why don't shoo dance? Dot's vhat music iss vor.
(*Simeon begins to hop first on one foot, then on the other.*) Dot's id! Dance! Dance! (*Hannah, too, begins to dance.*) Choy und dancing! Dot's vhat music iss, choy und dancing!

[*Simeon and Hannah dance together now, faster and faster as the music accelerates. Nell jumps on the table, beating time with her hands. Simeon starts to sing the words in a cracked voice.*]

SIMEON (*singing*).

Chickens a-crowin' on Sourwood Mountain,
Chickens a-crowin' on Sourwood Mountain,
Call up yer dogs and let's go a-huntin',

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Hey-ho, dee-iddle-um-day.

[Beads of sweat stand out on the faces of Old John and the dancers. Finally the tune ends in a great burst of speed that leaves them all exhausted. Old John pulls out a huge red handkerchief and wipes his face. Simeon drains the jug, while Hannah sits down heavily in a chair.]

SIMEON. Jumpin' Jehosophat! I ain't used ter thet!

HANNAH. We ain't danced tergether fir nigh on ten year, Simeon.

NELL. Play some more, Mr. Fiddler.

DRUM. Py golly, chilt, gif an old man time to catch his vind a pit.

[From overhead comes a sound like a stifled sob. Simeon and Hannah stiffen, and glance quickly at Drum, who appears not to have noticed.]

SIMEON. Reckon we'd better git ter bed, Hannah.

HANNAH *(getting up)*. Ayeh, reckon so.

SIMEON. Thanks for the music, stranger. Ther's a couple exter blankets under the stairs ifen ye need 'em. Hope ez how ye'll be comf'table.

DRUM. I vill pe quide comfortaple, t'ank you.

SIMEON. Reckon I'll bid ye good night thin, stranger.

HANNAH. Good night.

DRUM. Goot nighd.

SIMEON *(going up stairs)*. Come 'long, Nell.

NELL. I'm a-comin', paw. *(She waits until they disappear.)* Mr. Fiddler . . .

DRUM. Chess, chilt?

NELL. I wisht Luke cud o' heerd ye playin'. He's so sad, an' mebbe listenin' ter ye might o' made him feel better, so's he cud sleep. On'y I guess ye don' know 'bout Luke, do ye?

DRUM. I t'ink I did hear somevun oopstairs a little while ago. Iss dot who you mean?

NELL. Ayeh, thet's Luke. Folks hereabouts is a-scairt o' him cuz he stays up all night, burnin' lamps an' talkin' ter hisself, but I ain't a-scairt o' him, cuz he saved me

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from bein' drowned oncet, an' I love him more'n anybody in the hull world, next ter paw, o' course. It makes me feel bad cuz he's sick, an' ther' ain't nothin' I kin do ter he'p him.

DRUM. Berhabs I vill blay somet'ing chust vor him, somet'ing to make him sleebe.

NELL. Oh, would you?

DRUM. Bud if I fittled him to sleebe, berhabs he vould nod vake up.

NELL. Ifen Luke wuz happy an' didn't dream no more, I — I reckon it ud be all right.

HANNAH (*upstairs, calling*). Nell, come ter baid.

NELL. Good night, Mr. Fiddler.

DRUM. Goot nighd, chilt.

[He watches her disappear upstairs, then goes over and sits down before the fire with a sigh. Overhead the steady pacing continues. It seems much louder now, since the others have gone to bed. Old Drum listens attentively, then picks up his fiddle, tucks it under his chin, and slowly draws the bow across its strings. This time, however, no sound can be heard. As he continues to fiddle silently, the pacing overhead ceases. A door is heard opening, then closing, and, a moment later, Luke comes down the stairs. His eyes are closed and he is obviously walking in his sleep. He descends stealthily, crouching and looking back over his shoulder. He gets to the bottom of the stairs, walks a few feet further, then stands erect and sighs with relief. After a brief pause, he turns and begins to run. He takes only a few steps, however, when he draws up short with a frightened sob, as if he had unexpectedly encountered someone in the way. His terror mounts until he bursts into speech.]

LUKE. Wal, whyn't ye ast me? Go ahead, ast me whut I'm a-doin' out here, steada bein' in camp whur I b'long! Go ahead! (*Pause.*) Ye seed me a-runnin', didn't ye? Ye seed me a-runnin' away! (*Pause.*) Wal, say it! Say it! I know whut yer a-thinkin'! (*Shouting.*) I'm a yella coward, a stinkin' deserter! Say I am! Go

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on, say it! (*Pause.*) Wal, whut ye a-waitin' fir? Take me back ter camp an' lock me up! (*Pause.*) I ain't ashamed! I'm glad I run! Leastways I hed a chancet o' livin'. Thet's sumpin' ain't none o' ye got a-comin'! Ye think ye'll be alive arter termorrer mornin'? Yer fools, thet's whut ye be, the hull damn lot o' ye! Fools! Thet gen'ril up ther' a-settin' on his fat ass tole ye ter slit yer throats with yer own bayonets, ye'd do it! How much chancet ye think ye got o' gittin' acrost thet field alive with the hull damn Red Army ahint the stone wall on t'other side jes' a-waitin' fir ye ter show yer haid? Goddam gen'ril knows ye ain't got a chancet! Think he gives a damn? Hell, no! He'll jes' set on his horse, safe out o' range, and watch ye dumb bastards blow ter glory! (*Laughs ironically.*) Mebbe yer widder'll git a medal! Course she can't eat it, but whut's the damn gov'ment care 'bout thet! Go ahead, git yer-selves kilt. I ain't sorry fir ye! (*Coaxing.*) Whyn't ye run away, too? Ye'd be a fool ter stay. Ain't nubuddy seed us. We cud hide oursel's in a week so's the damn gov'ment coul'n't never fin' us. We'd go out West, Californy, mebbe. Strike it rich, hev a big laugh on all thim dead heroes we left ahint! Whut ye say? I ain't rich, but I got a little sock hid away. I know whur I cud lay hands on three hunnert dullar. I'd be willin' ter split it with ye. Whut ye say? (*Pause.*) God! I'll give ye the hull o' it ifen ye'll on'y let me go! Ain't nubuddy but ye seed me. I knowed the lines — slipped right through 'em. Hadn't been fir ye, I'd o' got away clean. (*Pause.*) I ain't never seed ye afore. Whut's yer name? Whut comp'ny ye from? (*Pause.*) Fir Christ's sake, quit starin' an' say sumpin', jes' say it! (*Pause.*) Whyn't ye shoot me? Thet's whut I'll git, anyways. (*Turns his back.*) Shoot the stinkin' deserter, thet's whut he deserves! Court martial's too good fir 'im! (*Pause.*) Shoot, will ye! Shoot! Shoot! (*Whirls furiously.*) By God, I'll make ye do sumpin'!

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(He springs, and grapples with his imaginary opponent, tears himself loose, holding an imaginary rifle.) Now I got the rifle, damn ye! Now will ye stop a-starin', an' talk? Go on, talk! *(Pause.)* Talk, er I'll blow yer rotted guts out! *(Pause.)* Talk! I'm a-tellin' ye fir the las' time! *(He fires the rifle.)* Ther'! Ye won't never talk now, not with thet lead in ye! *(Hysterically.)* Wal, fall, damn ye! Fall! *(Pause.)* Oh, Christ!

[He throws away the rifle, and starts to run, but staggers and falls. Drum, who has been quietly watching the above pantomime, goes to him.]

DRUM. Nathan!

LUKE *(rousing)*. Fall, I tell ye! Fall! *(He groans, and sits up.)* He's gone!

DRUM. I am shtill here, Nathan.

LUKE. Ye ain't him. Ye look like him, but ye ain't him. Ye ain't wearin' no uniform. *(Getting up slowly and looking around.)* Ther' ain't no hill here, either. I'm safe, safe here in Simeon's house! Must o' dreamed. Thet's it, I dreamed!

DRUM. Efery nighd you tream, und efrey morning you vake again mit te memory uf dot tream, und te fear uf te nighd vchich iss to come.

LUKE *(guardedly)*. Don' know whut yer talkin' 'bout, stranger. 'Sides, muh name ain't Nathan. It's Luke — Luke Putnam.

DRUM. Aren't you veary uf treams und fear, Nathan?

LUKE. Whur ye come from? Who be ye?

DRUM. I am a bart uf your tream.

LUKE. I ain't dreamin' now. Yer real same's me.

DRUM. Sometimes treams are more real t'en anyt'ing else in te world.

LUKE. Ye don' make no sense. Whoever heerd o' dreams bein' real!

DRUM. T'ey are, Nathan. Your tream iss as real as you are. You are te tream und te tream iss you. Dot iss

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why you cannot escape it. Dot iss why you can nefer escape me.

LUKE. I'll travel so fir ye won't never be able ter fin' me.

DRUM. Vhen nighd comes and sleeb closes your eyes, I vill pe t'ere. Always I haf been mit you — always, since te nighd vhen you first ran away.

LUKE. Who be ye?

DRUM. I am te sentry uf Fredericksburg, te man dot you could not kill, te man whose eyes you cannot hide from.

LUKE (*uneasily*). Ye ain't, yer a human bein', same's me.

DRUM. I am te eternal bart uf te human.

LUKE (*with an attempt at scorn*). I'd kill ye easy ez a fly ifen I'da mind ter.

DRUM (*taking the axe from its place by the fire*). Try, Nathan.

LUKE (*recoiling*). No! I done enough!

DRUM. Are you afraid, Nathan?

[*Luke takes the axe angrily, swings it high. As he does so, his eyes meet Drum's for the first time. He lets the axe fall nervelessly to the floor.*]

LUKE (*hopelessly*). Whyn't ye go away an' let me alone!

DRUM. I am your friend.

LUKE (*bitterly*). My friend!

DRUM. I can gif you rest.

LUKE (*yearning*). Rest!

DRUM. Why did you try to run away at Fredericksburg?

LUKE. 'Cuz I wuz young, 'cuz I wanted ter go on a-livin'.

DRUM. Und has life been goot since t'en?

LUKE. Oh, God! Let me alone!

DRUM. Don't you see, Nathan, dot vhen a man avoids te fade dot has been allodded to him, life pecomes a purden? Dime stolen from eternity is always pitter. Veren't you happy pefore you ran away?

LUKE. I dunno, reckon I wuz. Leastways I slep' nights, an' never wisht fir much.

DRUM. T'en vhat dit it madder vhen Teath came? To die vhen you are young und happy iss far far petter t'en to

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die when you are old und in pitterness. Pelieve me, Nathan, life iss nod measured in terms uf dime. Life iss like a chealous voman. Surrender yourself to her freely, und she vill revard you mit a gracious smile; vit'old te smallest bart uf yourself, und she vill punish you mit te tarkest frown.

LUKE. But it's too late.

DRUM. Id iss nefer too lade.

LUKE. Whut kin I do?

DRUM. Surrender yourself to life.

LUKE. Whut d'ye mean?

DRUM. You must cross te field at Fredericksburg.

LUKE. But a man can't go back twelve year. A man can't live his life over agin.

DRUM. Dime iss only an illusion uf te mind. You can reliff any moment uf your life dot you vish.

LUKE. How?

DRUM. T'ink back to dot nighd telve years ago. T'ink wery hard. (*He goes to the door and opens it, as a gust of wind and snow swirls in.*) Look — look closely! Vhat do you see?

LUKE. Nothin'. The night, the snow.

DRUM. T'ink wery hard.

LUKE (*slowly, hypnotically*). A mist, a thick, grey mist.

DRUM. Go on.

LUKE. It's gittin' lighter, the mist is beginnin' ter lift. The sun's a-comin' up.

DRUM. Go on.

LUKE. I see men in blue, swimmin' in the mist, horses pawin' the groun', an' light dancin' on rifle barrels. Thousan's of men in blue, an' horses, an' rifles.

DRUM. Und beyond?

LUKE. An' beyond, an open field, slopin' up, an' away acrost it, a stone wall, an' light dancin' on rifle barrels.

DRUM. Listen! Vhat do you hear?

[*The sound of cannon and rifle fire comes faintly, as if from a great distance.*]

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LUKE. Cannon and rifles.

DRUM. Go on.

[A bugle is heard, faintly sounding the charge.]

LUKE. A bugle blowin' the charge.

DRUM. Go on.

LUKE. The cavalry charges. The Rebs volley. Men fall from their horses and are trampled beneath the hooves. Another volley. The charge wavers and breaks. The horses come back with empty saddles.

DRUM. Listen!

[The bugle, barely audible, blows the infantry charge.]

LUKE. The bugle blows the charge. The men are movin' for'ard.

[Like an automaton, he straightens and walks toward the door. At the threshold, he checks and turns wildly around.]

LUKE. No! No! I won't!

DRUM. Id iss te only vay, Nathan.

LUKE. Ther' ain't a chancet o' livin' on thet field.

DRUM. To see Teath clearly, shtanding in te road ahead, und nod to move py vun inch from te bath dot you must follow — dot is te nobles' vay a man can die.

LUKE. Ther' ain't no sense ter it. Ther' ain't a chancet o' winnin'.

DRUM. Only te liffig are peaten, Nathan; te tead always vin.

LUKE. But I don' want ter die like o' thet! Cut down like wheat afore the hook, screamin' and clawin' an' spurtin' blood!

DRUM. Bain iss bart uf liffig, Nathan. Teath iss kind.

LUKE. I can't!

DRUM. Unless you face id, you must liff mit te fear uf Teath always in your heart.

LUKE. I can't! I can't!

DRUM *(going to close the door)*. So! As you vish!

LUKE *(quickly)*. No! I-I'll go!

[He stands very erect, and walks, slowly at first, then more and more confidently, toward the door. The sound of

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cannon swells to a climax as he goes out, then dies away as the lights slowly fade.

After a few seconds, the lights come up quickly, revealing the same room in the early morning. Old Drum is gone, fiddle and all, the door swings to and fro in the breeze, and a pile of snow has drifted into the room. Hannah comes down the stairs, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

HANNAH. Mornin', stranger, hope ye slep' well. (*Receiving no reply, she looks around, sees the open door.*) Wal, I swan! Gone an' lef' the door open inter the bargain! (*She goes to close the door, and, as she does so, suddenly stiffens as she sees something outside.*) Simeon! Simeon!

SIMEON (*coming hurriedly down the stairs*). Whut's the matter, Hannah? Whut's ailin' ye?

HANNAH (*pointing, almost in a whisper*). Look!

SIMEON (*horrified*). Lor'!

[*He goes out as Nell comes down.*]

NELL. Maw, whut's happened? Whur's paw a-goin'?

HANNAH. Ye better run along upstairs, child. (*Simeon comes in slowly.*) Is he — daid?

SIMEON (*nodding*). Ain't no use ter call Doc. Froze ter death. Must o' walked in his sleep.

[*Nell rushes out.*]

HANNAH (*mechanically*). Lor' rest 'im!

SIMEON. He said he'd be a-leavin' in the mornin'.

HANNAH. The Lord knows how ter pervide. Luke warn't no good ter hisself ner nubuddy else, an' the Lord seed fit ter take him away.

SIMEON. Ayeh, reckon it's all fir the best. Leastways he's a-restin' now. He ain't rested fir a mighty long spell. (*Nell enters quietly.*) Ye shouldn't o' gone out ther', Nell. It ain't no sight fir a young un.

NELL. I'm a'right, paw.

HANNAH. Wonder whut 'tull cost ter put 'im away proper.

Curtain

[140]

TOM SAWYER'S MORNING

**ADAPTED BY
REGINA BROWN**

**DEDICATED
TO
ALBERT KENNEDY AND IRENE FEENEY,
UNIVERSITY SETTLEMENT, NEW YORK CITY**

CAST

~~TOM SAWYER~~

JOE HARPER

AUNT POLLY

NEW BOY

JIM

BEN ROGERS

~~BILLY FISHER~~

JOHNNY MILLER

JOSIE MILLER

HUCKLEBERRY FINN

BECKY THATCHER

TIME. Morning.

PLACE. Tom Sawyer's front yard.

TOM SAWYER

At the rise of the curtain, Tom Sawyer and Joe Harper are on the stage, playing mumbly-peg, the act of flipping a knife and making it stick upright in the ground. Tom has just successfully flipped his knife.

TOM (*rolls on the ground shouting with joy at his success*).

Yeah! I win! I win! I win!

JOE. You did not. I saw you, Tom. You cheated.

TOM. I did not. You're sore because you lost.

JOE. I'm not. You cheated.

TOM (*angrily*). I didn't.

JOE. You did.

TOM. I didn't.

JOE. You did.

TOM. I'll prove that I didn't. I'll do it all over again.

(Tom pulls the knife out of the ground and flips it again. It fails to stand upright. The tone of Tom's voice bespeaks his disappointment.) Aw! Gee!

JOE (*I-told-you-so attitude*). You see.

TOM. Well, it slipped that time.

AUNT POLLY (*offstage calling*). Tom! Tom! Yoo-hoo, Tom!

TOM (*starts at the sound of Aunt Polly's voice*). Gee, it's Aunt Polly. Come on, Joe, let's hide.

[Tom and Joe hide behind a barrel upstage.]

AUNT POLLY (*enters through the gate, carrying a pail of white-wash and brush. She calls again*). Tom! Tom! Yoo-hoo, Tom! I never did see the beat of that boy. *(She puts the pail down near the fence.)* Yoo-hoo, Tom! *(As she turns to look upstage towards barrel, she sees the top of Tom's head.)* There! Tom, come here this minute. *(Tom comes over to Aunt Polly,*

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hanging his head sheepishly. Aunt Polly angrily wags her finger at Tom.) Always playing me tricks! You 'pears to know just how long you can torment me. "Spare the rod and spoil the child," as the Good Book says. I'm a-layin' up sin and suffering for us both, I know. I hate to make you work on Saturday, but you must be punished for playing hookey from school yesterday. I've got to do my duty, or I'll be the ruination of you, Tom Sawyer. Now take that pail and brush and white-wash the fence.

TOM. Aw, gee, Aunt Polly, I want to go swimming.

AUNT POLLY (*grabbing Tom's ear and pulling him towards the fence*). Get along! Get along!

TOM (*standing on his toes to ease the pain*). Ouch! Ouch, that hurts.

AUNT POLLY. Now mind you do it!

[*She lets go of Tom's ear, and exits through the gate.*]

TOM (*takes brush out of the pail and looks at it with disgust*). Gee whiz!

JOE. Sorry, Tom, old pal.

TOM (*throws brush back into the pail and comes downstage*). She would pick out Saturday. (*Tom sits on ground; Joe follows his example.*) I'm about to the boiling-point, Joe. And if you wasn't my friend, I reckon I'd lick you just to get even with my feelings.

[*With a threatening right fist, he takes a swing at Joe.*]

JOE (*ducking and moving away*). I am your friend, Tom.

TOM. Don't get scared; you're my pal. (*The new boy can be heard whistling offstage.*) Maybe it's one of the gang.

JOE (*gets up and looks offstage*). Naw, it's the new boy. (*Laughs.*) And looky, Tom, how he's tugged out.

TOM (*goes over to Joe, and looks offstage. Both boys laugh*). Look at the natty cap and pantaloons he's wearing, and the bright necktie.

JOE. Yeah, and he's wearing shoes, and it's only Saturday.

TOM SAWYER'S MORNING

TOM. Watch me, Joe.

[Tom motions Joe to step aside. With legs apart and arms folded, Tom awaits the arrival of the New Boy. When the New Boy enters, Tom blocks his way. The New Boy, thinking perhaps he is at fault, steps to the right. Tom again blocks him. Now he knows Tom is looking for a fight, but he tries to avoid it because he is not dressed for fighting, so he steps to the left and Tom blocks his way again. Both boys glare at each other.]

TOM *(up into the New Boy's face)*. I can lick you.

NEW BOY. I'd like to see you try it.

TOM. Well, I can do it.

NEW BOY. No you can't, either.

[Nose to nose.]

TOM. Yes, I can.

NEW BOY. You can't.

TOM. CAN.

NEW BOY. CAN'T.

TOM. CAN.

NEW BOY. CAN'T.

[Both boys glare at each other. There is a pause before Tom speaks. He realizes this can't go on forever, so he breaks the silence as he speaks in a threatening tone.]

TOM. What's your name?

NEW BOY. 'Tisn't any of your business, maybe.

TOM. Well, I 'low I'll make it my business.

NEW BOY. Well, why don't you?

TOM. If you say much, I will.

NEW BOY. Much. Much. Much. Much. There now!

TOM *(draws his head back a little. This New Boy is pretty hard to handle)*. Oh, you think you're mighty smart, don't you? I could lick you with one hand tied behind me, if I wanted to.

[Tom puts one hand behind him to demonstrate.]

NEW BOY *(calling Tom's bluff)*. Well, why don't you do it? You say you can do it.

TOM. Well, I will if you fool with me.

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NEW BOY (*laughs at Tom*). Oh, yes, I've seen whole families in the same fix.

TOM. Smarty! You think you're some, now, don't you?

[*The New Boy laughs at Tom. Tom doesn't like being laughed at, but not being sure he has sized the New Boy up, he delays fighting him by poking fun at his hat.*

TOM. Oh, what a hat!

[*Tom roars with laughter as he points to the New Boy's hat. Joe joins in the laughter. The New Boy makes a pass at Joe, and Joe scrambles behind the barrel.*

NEW BOY (*to Tom*). You can lump that hat, if you don't like it. (*The New Boy pulls his hat way down over his ears.*) I dare you to knock it off . . . and anybody 'll take a dare will suck eggs.

TOM (*delays longer. He still can't make up his mind whether it's safe to strike or not*). You're a liar.

NEW BOY. You're another.

TOM. You're a fighting liar, and dasn't take it up.

NEW BOY (*putting his hand on top of Tom's shoulder, he gives him a shove*). Aw, take a walk.

TOM (*infuriated, returns the shove*). Say, if you give me much more of your sass, I'll take and bounce a rock off your head.

NEW BOY (*laughing at Tom*). Oh, of course you will.

TOM. Well, I will.

NEW BOY. Well, why don't you do it then? Why do you keep saying you will for? Why don't you do it? It's because you're afraid.

TOM. I ain't afraid.

NEW BOY. You are.

[*Both boys eye each other. Then, shoulder to shoulder, each tries to push the other over. There is much puffing and straining.*

TOM. Get away from here.

NEW BOY. Go away yourself.

[*After a struggle the New Boy steps back, and Tom falls*

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to the ground. The New Boy laughs. Tom groans with pain.

TOM (*gets up; tries hard to keep the tears back*). You're a coward and a pup. (*Tom invents a big brother to quiet the sneering New Boy.*) I'll tell my big brother on you. And he can thrash you with his little finger, and I'll make him do it too.

NEW BOY. What do I care for your big brother! (*Inventing a bigger big brother.*) I've got a brother that's bigger than him, and what's more, he can throw him over that fence, too.

[*Nose to nose.*]

TOM. That's a lie.

NEW BOY. You're saying so don't make it so.

TOM (*stepping back and drawing a line in the dirt with his big toe*). I dare you to step over that line, and I'll lick you 'till you can't stand up. Anybody that'll take a dare will steal sheep.

[*Tom steps back and waits to see what will happen. To his surprise, the New Boy jumps over the line.*]

NEW BOY (*calling Tom's bluff*). Now, you said you'd do it, why don't you do it?

TOM (*taken back at the New Boy's courage*). By jingo! For two cents I will do it.

[*The New Boy puts his hand into his pocket and takes out two coppers. He holds out his hand with the coppers on it. Tom knocks the money out of his hand and jumps on his neck, throwing the New Boy to the ground. They fight, pull and tear. Joe comes out from behind the barrel to cheer Tom.*]

JOE. Ho, ho, he didn't believe you'd do it, Tom. Hurray for Tom! Get him, Tom! Get him!

[*Joe pulls the New Boy's hair and jumps on him. In the struggle both boys roll over on top of Joe. Joe screams for help.*]

JOE. Hey, look out! Hey, Tom, it's me, Joe, your pal! Help, hey Mom! Mom!

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[Jim steals offstage. Joe and Tom are so interested in the toe they fail to see Jim go. They do not discover his absence until they hear him singing offstage.]

TOM (*turning and looking offstage in the direction from which Jim's voice is heard*). Hey, Jim! (*Quickly re-winds the bandage on his toe, then gets up and shouts offstage after Jim.*) All right, Jim, you're a traitor!

JOE (*edging towards stage left, awaiting his chance to run*). Well, so long, Tom. Sure is a good day for swimmin'.
[Makes a quick exit.]

TOM. Hey, Joe! (*Tom can see Joe gaining ground, as he makes for the road to the ole swimmin' hole.*) Gee whiz! What a pal! (*Mutters to himself as he goes up to the fence.*) The first warm day we have for swimmin', and I have to white-wash the fence! (*Takes brush from pail and slaps the white-wash on the fence.*) White-washin' a fence on Saturday! It's enough to make a feller want to run away.

[Ben Rogers is heard offstage, imitating a train.]

BEN ROGERS. Ding-dong . . . ding-dong . . . chu-chu-chu-chu. Come ahead, chu-chu! (*Enters stage left, shuffling his feet.*) Ding-dong . . . ding-dong. All aboard! Let 'er go! Ding-dong . . . ding-dong.

[Tom pretends not to see Ben. He busies himself with the fence, painting with fancy strokes to entice Ben.]

BEN. Hello, Tom. Yer up a stump, ain't yer?

[Tom pretends not to hear Ben. His strokes become more artistic and tantalizing.]

BEN. Hello, old chap, yer got to work, eh?

TOM (*turning as if he has just noticed Ben*). Why, it's you, Ben! I warn't noticing.

[Goes back to painting.]

BEN (*a regular meany, he continues to tease Tom*). Say, I'm goin' in swimmin', I am. Don't you wish you could? But of course you'd rather work. Wouldn't you? Course you would.

TOM. What do you call work?

TOM SAWYER'S MORNING

[The strokes become more tantalizing.]

BEN. Why, ain't that work?

TOM. Well, maybe it is, and maybe it ain't. All I know is, that it suits Tom Sawyer.

BEN. Oh, come on now. You don't mean to let on that you like it?

TOM. Like it? Well, I don't see why I oughtn't to like it. Does a feller get a chance to white-wash a fence every day?

[A pause.]

BEN *(it is too strong a temptation for Ben; he falls into the trap)*. Say, Tom, let me white-wash a little?

[A slight pause.]

TOM *(trying not to appear too anxious)*. No . . . no . . . I reckon it wouldn't hardly do, Ben. You see, Aunt Polly's awful par-tic-ler about this fence, — right here on the street, you know. But if it was the back fence, I wouldn't mind; and she wouldn't. Yes, she's awful par-tic-ler about this fence; it's got to be done very careful. I reckon there ain't one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it's got to be done.

[Tom continues to paint.]

BEN. Oh, is that so? Oh, come on now, lemme just try. Only just a little. I'd let you, if you was me, Tom.

TOM *(in a very serious tone)*. Ben, I'd like to, honest injun; but Aunt Polly . . . Well, Jim wanted to do it, but Aunt Polly wouldn't let him. Joe Harper wanted to, but she wouldn't let Joe. Now don't you see how I'm fixed? If you was to tackle this fence, and anything was to happen to it . . .

BEN *(interrupts by pleading for the chance to paint)*. Aw shucks, I'll be just as careful. Now lemme try. *(A pause. Tom still holds out. Ben takes an apple from his pocket and holds it out to Tom.)* I'll give you the core of my apple.

TOM *(looks at the shiny red apple and decides it's the whole*

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apple or nothing). No, Ben, now don't. I'm afeard —
[*Tom continues to white-wash.*]

BEN. I'll give you all of it. (*Ben takes a big bite out of the apple before handing it to Tom.*) Well, here.

[*Tom takes the apple and gives the brush to Ben. Then he sits on the barrel to enjoy the apple. Little Ben paints and hums.*]

BEN. Ding-dong! Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

[*Billy Fisher enters right. He runs on backwards, tugging at a big kite, trying to get it to fly. As he turns around to run, he trips and falls flat on his face. Tom and Ben laugh. Billy, covering up his embarrassment, laughs too.*]

BILLY. Hello, Tom. Hello, Ben. (*Picks himself up and goes over to Ben.*) Hey, what yer doin'?

BEN. I'm swimmin', can't you see?

[*Ben and Tom laugh at Billy. Billy can't see the joke. He sneers at Ben.*]

BILLY. Think yer funny, don't yer? (*To Tom.*) How come, Tom, yer lettin' him paint yer fence? Looky how he streaks it!

BEN (*shakes the brush at Billy's face as he talks*). Oh, is that so! Well, I traded this here job for a big juicy apple; so, smarty, right now it's my fence.

[*Having made it clear to Billy, he goes back to the white-washing.*]

TOM (*gets off the barrel and comes over to Billy*). Say, where'd you get the kite?

BILLY. I traded it for a fish line.

TOM (*examines the kite*). Gee, she's a beauty!

BILLY. Looky, Tom, are you goin' to let him run yer business fer yer?

TOM (*just finishes the apple at this point. Now he has his eye on the kite*). I should say not. You know, Ben, Billy is right. You're making a bum job of it, and so that disqualifies you.

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[*"Disqualifies" is a new word for Ben, but he manages to interpret Tom's meaning when Tom takes the brush from his hand and threatens him with his fist.*

BEN. Well, give me back my apple, then.

TOM. Can't, Ben, it's gone.

[*Tom laughs and turns to Billy, who in turn sees the joke and laughs too.*

BEN (*almost in tears*). How about the core?

TOM. Gone too. Anyways, you had your apple's worth, seein' it was only part of an apple. (*Tom and Billy enjoy the joke.*) Go on, beat it, Ben! (*Ben stands his ground. Tom shows his fist.*) Go on, Ben, beat it!

BEN (*runs to stage left, then turns towards Tom*). Cheatin' always shows, Tom. Wait 'till I get you next time.

[*Ben sticks out his tongue at Tom, just as he is about to exit. Tom runs to chase him, but Ben is gone by this time.*

TOM (*shouting after Ben*). Sore head!

BILLY. Could I finish it, Tom?

[*Tom, realizing the tactics he used with Ben were very successful, decides to do the same with Billy.*

TOM. Nope, made a big mistake when I let Ben bungle it, and I'm afeard to trust this work to anyone but myself; Aunt Polly's terrible per-tic-ler.

[*Tom begins to white-wash.*

BILLY. But I'm awful per-tic-ler about work I do, — honest, Tom.

TOM. Can't take the risk.

BILLY. Let yer fly my kite.

[*Tom stops white-washing. He is about to call it a trade, but he holds out a little longer, knowing he'll get the kite.*

TOM. Nope, afeard to play with borrowed things; never can tell what may happen.

BILLY (*falling into the trap*). Here, keep it. Now, do I get the brush?

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TOM (*hesitating*). I hadn't ought to, but . . . well, for just a while. But I've got to watch and see if you're doin' a good job.

[*Tom gives Billy the brush, who in turn gives Tom the kite. Tom goes back to the barrel and sits on it. He examines the kite, and Billy white-washes the fence.*]

BILLY. Sure.

TOM. It's a powerful big job to handle.

[*Johnny Miller enters right, swinging a dead rat on the end of a rope.*]

JOHNNY. Hello, Tom. Hi there, silly Bill!

BILLY. Chuck the silly Bill stuff.

JOHNNY. Sure, silly Bill.

[*Johnny hits Billy on the head with the dead rat as he walks to the other side of him. Johnny and Tom laugh.*]

BILLY (*getting up and threatening Johnny*). See here, Johnny Miller, I'll sock you.

JOHNNY (*laughing*). A skinny-marink like you!

[*Johnny shoves Billy. Billy takes a swing at Johnny and misses. Tom comes over, gets between the two boys and separates them.*]

TOM. Hey, Billy, you'd better beat it.

BILLY (*shakes brush reprovingly at Tom*). I will not. Besides, I ain't finished paintin' yet.

JOHNNY. Oh, yes, you are. I think I'll take a swing at it.

[*Johnny takes hold of Billy's hand, the one holding the brush, and forces it up into Billy's face, covering it with white-wash. Johnny and Tom laugh at Billy's discomfort. Billy gasps for breath and wipes the white-wash on the sleeve of his blouse. When he has cleared his eyes, he makes a dash for Johnny; Tom separates them.*]

TOM. Hey, you, do you want my Aunt Polly to hear you? Go on, beat it, Billy!

BILLY (*crying*). I want my kite back.

TOM. Injun giver! I got to be paid for the work you done, so I'm keepin' it.

JOHNNY (*swinging his rat*). Sure, anyways a dead rat is

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better, Tom. You can have him if you let me paint a bit. TOM (*takes the rat from Johnny*). It's a go, Johnny. Go on, Billy, beat it! (*Billy stands his ground. Tom threatens Billy with the rat.*) Or I'll make you kiss the rat!

BILLY (*screaming as he exits right*). Mom! Oh, Mom! Mom . . . !

[*Tom and Johnny roar with laughter.*]

TOM. Oh, boy, I bet he never stops 'till he reaches home. (*Holding up rat to examine it, as he crosses to barrel to sit.*) Gee, he's a fat one, Johnny. Where'd you catch him?

JOHNNY (*picking up brush, starts to paint*). In our parlor. He's been eatin' the tassels off Ma's best couch and all Ma's curtains. You see, we only discovered it when Pap died. Ma always keeps the parlor locked. Pap used to say yer had to die to git in our parlor. And he sure were right.

TOM. Did he ever get to go in?

JOHNNY. Who, my Pap?

TOM. Yes.

JOHNNY. Sure, couple of weeks ago, when he died. Pap had it for three whole days; all his friends came, and Ma let 'em smoke. Poor Pap, he couldn't; but he would have been powerful happy to see Mr. Ezra and the rest of 'em smoke up the place, — somethin' he weren't let do. That's when we discovered the rat's nest.

TOM. Gee, he's a swell rat, livin' in a parlor. Say, did you ever see a church mouse?

JOHNNY. Naw.

TOM. I heard tell that no cat will touch 'em, 'cause they're sacred or somethin'. Do you suppose a sacred mouse would bring good luck?

JOHNNY. Sure, but it's bad luck to steal anything from church.

TOM. Shucks!

[*Josie Miller, sister of Johnny, enters left. She skips*

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on, eating bread and jam. She stops suddenly, on seeing Johnny.

JOSIE. Johnny, there you are! Mamma wants you; she's been looking for you all morning.

JOHNNY. Aw, go on home.

JOSIE (*shouting at Johnny*). Mamma wants you to take the wash to Mrs. Thatchers. You'd better go home, or I'll tell Mamma on you.

JOHNNY (*threatening Josie with the paint brush*). You do, and I'll . . .

JOSIE (*interrupts with a warning*). You do, and I'll tell Mamma. You know what she said about hitting me, 'cause I'm a girl.

JOHNNY. Makes no difference to me. Rats or girls, I'll kill 'em all. How about it, Tom?

TOM. Sure, they're all alike, Johnny.

JOSIE (*turning on Tom*). You needn't make-believe, Tom. I saw you follow that new girl, Becky Thatcher, home from school. (*In a sing-song voice, teasing Tom.*) Shame, shame, on Tommy! Tommy loves Becky! Tommy loves Becky!

TOM (*shouts at Josie; his cheeks are hot and crimson*). Shut up, Josie!

JOSIE (*defying Tom, and enjoying his discomfort*). You can't make me shut up, 'cause I'm a girl. And boys can't hit girls. (*Josie continues to tease Tom.*) Tommy loves Becky! Tommy loves Becky!

JOHNNY. That's what I've got to listen to all day long. Did you ever see such a big mouth?

JOSIE (*turning on Johnny*). You'd better go home, Johnny. Mamma wants you. (*Screams at Johnny.*) Mamma wants you! And you know what she does when you don't come home!

[*Johnny, disgusted, throws the brush into the pail, goes over to Josie, and flattens the bread and jam she's been eating all over her face. Johnny and Tom have a good*

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laugh. As soon as she recovers her breath, she screams for help.

JOSIE. Mamma . . . Mamma . . . Mamma!

JOHNNY (*grabs Josie by the hair of her head*). Come on, you weasel. (*With a yank, he drags the screaming Josie offstage.*) So long, Tom, see you later.

[*Exits left.*]

TOM (*shouts after Johnny*). That's the way to treat 'em, Johnny! So long, pal. (*Whistling can be heard off-stage right. Tom turns, listens. He hangs rat on the gate and runs to right.*) Huckleberry!

[*Huckleberry Finn enters right, carrying burlap bag over his shoulder.*]

TOM. Hello, Huckleberry.

HUCKLEBERRY (*keeps right on going, in his lazy way*).

Hello yourself, and see how you like it.

TOM (*walking alongside of Huck*). What's that you got?

HUCKLEBERRY. Dead cat.

TOM. Lemme see him, Huck? (*Tom stops Huckleberry by standing in front of him. Huckleberry opens the bag and Tom looks in, but he quickly pulls his head out of the bag. This time he holds his nose, as he takes a second look. Then feels the bag.*) My, he's pretty stiff. Where'd you get him?

HUCKLEBERRY (*closing bag*). Bought him off a boy.

TOM. What did you give?

HUCKLEBERRY. I gave a blue ticket and a bladder that I got at the slaughter house.

TOM (*laughing at Huckleberry*). Where'd you ever get a blue Sunday School ticket?

HUCKLEBERRY. Bought it off Ben Rogers a week ago for a hoop-stick.

TOM. Say, Huck, what is dead cats good for, anyways?

HUCKLEBERRY. Good for? Cure warts with.

[*Sits on barrel.*]

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TOM. No? Is that so? I know somethin' that's better.

[Sits on ground at Huck's feet.]

HUCKLEBERRY. I bet you don't. What is it?

TOM. Why, spunk-water.

HUCKLEBERRY. Spunk-water! I wouldn't give a darn for spunk-water!

TOM. You wouldn't, would you? Did you ever try it?

HUCKLEBERRY. No, I ain't; but Bob Tanner did.

TOM. Who told you so?

HUCKLEBERRY. Why, he told Jeff Thatcher, and Jeff told Johnny Baker, and Johnny Baker told Jim Hollis, and Jim told Ben Rogers, and Ben told a nigger and the nigger told me. There now.

TOM. Well, what of it? They'll all lie; leastways all but the nigger — I don't know him. Shucks, now you tell me how Bob Tanner done it, Huck.

HUCKLEBERRY. Why, he took and dipped his hand in a rotten stump, where the rain water was . . .

TOM. In the daytime?

HUCKLEBERRY. Sure thing!

TOM. With his face to the stump?

HUCKLEBERRY. Yes. Least, I reckon so.

TOM. Did he say anything?

HUCKLEBERRY. I don't reckon he did. I don't know.

TOM. Aha! Talk about trying to cure warts with spunk-water; such a blame fool way as that. Why, that ain't a goin' to do any good. *(Gets up and crosses to right as he talks.)* You got to go all by yourself to the middle of the woods, where you know there is a spunk-water stump; and just as it is midnight you back up against the stump and jam your hand in and say *(Tom jams his hand into an imaginary stump.)* "barley-corn, barley-corn, injun-meal short, spunk-water, spunk-water, swaller these warts." And then walk away quick eleven steps, with your eyes shut.

[Tom demonstrates as he nears Huck; Huck puts out his foot and trips Tom.]

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HUCKLEBERRY. Aw, that's too much trouble.

TOM. Awe, cut it, Huck. Do you want to hear the way, or don't you?

HUCKLEBERRY. Aw right, go ahead.

TOM (*continuing the demonstration*). And then turn around three times (*As Tom makes the turns he watches Huckleberry closely; he distrusts his every movement.*) and walk home without speaking to anybody. Because if you speak, the charm's busted.

HUCKLEBERRY. Well, that sounds like a good way, but that ain't the way Bob Tanner done it.

TOM. No sir, you can bet he didn't. Because he's the wartiest boy in this town; and he wouldn't have a wart on him if he knowed how to work spunk-water. I've took off thousands of warts off my hands, Huck. I play with frogs so much that I've always got considerable many warts. Sometimes I take 'em off with a bean.

HUCKLEBERRY. Yep, bean's good. I've done that.

TOM. Have you, Huck? What's your way?

HUCKLEBERRY. You take and split the bean, and cut the wart so as to get some blood, and then you put the blood on one piece of the bean. You see, the piece that's got the blood on it will keep drawing and drawing, trying to fetch the other piece to it, and so that helps the blood to draw the wart, and pretty soon, off she comes.

TOM (*all excited about it*). Yes, that's it, Huck, that's it; though when you're burying it, if you say, "Down bean, off wart, come no more to bother me," it's better. That's the way Joe Harper does, and he's been nearly to Coonville and back, and most everywhere. But say, — how do you cure 'em with dead cats?

HUCKLEBERRY (*in an eerie tone*). Why, you take your cat and go and get in a graveyard 'long about midnight, when somebody that's been wicked has been buried; and when it's midnight, a devil will come, or maybe two or three; but you can't see 'em, you can only hear somethin' like the wind, or maybe hear 'em talk; and when they're

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takin' that feller away, you heave your cat after 'em, and say, "Devil follow corpse, cat follow devil, warts follow cat; I'm done wid ye!" That'll fetch any wart.

TOM. Sounds right. Did you ever try it, Huck?

HUCKLEBERRY. No, but old Mother Hopkins told me.

TOM. Well, I reckon it's right then, because they say she's a witch.

HUCKLEBERRY. Say! Why, Tom, I know she is. She witched Pap. Pap says so, his own self. He came along one day, and he seed she was a-witchin' him, so he took up a rock, and if she hadn't dodged he'd a got her. Well, that very night Pap rolled off'n a shed, where he was a-layin' drunk, and broke his arm.

TOM. Why, that's awful, Huck. How did he know she was a-witchin' him?

HUCKLEBERRY. Pap says, "When they keep lookin' at ye right stiddy, they're a-witchin' ye"; especially if they mumble, because when they mumble, they're sayin' the Lord's Prayer backwards.

TOM. Say, Hucky, when you goin' to try the dead cat?

HUCKLEBERRY. Tonight. I reckon they'll come after old Hoss Williams tonight. Their charms can't work 'till midnight.

TOM. Lemme go with you.

HUCKLEBERRY. Of course, if you ain't afeared.

TOM. Afeared? 'Tain't likely. Will you meow?

HUCKLEBERRY. Yes, and you meow back if you get a chance. Last time you kept me a-meowing around 'till old Hayes went to throwing rocks at me, and says, "darn that cat"; and so I hove a brick through his window, but don't you tell.

TOM. I won't. I couldn't meow that night because Aunt Polly was watching me. But I'll meow this time.

[*Huckleberry takes a box from his pocket and empties its invisible contents on the back of his hand.*]

TOM. Say, what's that?

HUCKLEBERRY. Nothin' but a tick.

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TOM. Where'd you get him?

HUCKLEBERRY. Out in the woods.

TOM. What'll you take for him?

HUCKLEBERRY. I don't know. I reckon I don't want to sell him.

TOM. All right, it's a mighty small tick, anyways.

HUCKLEBERRY. Oh, anybody can run a tick down that don't belong to 'em. I'm satisfied with it. It's a good enough tick for me.

TOM. Sure, there's ticks a-plenty. I could have a thousand of 'em if I wanted to.

HUCKLEBERRY. Well, why don't you? Because you know mighty well that you can't. This here's a pretty early tick; I reckon it's the first one I've seen this year.

TOM. Say, Huck, I'll give you my tooth for him.

HUCKLEBERRY. Let's see it. (*Tom takes tooth from pocket and shows it to Huckleberry.*) Is it gen-u-wyne? (*Tom opens his mouth and shows the vacancy.*) Well, all right, it's a trade. (*They exchange. Becky Thatcher can be heard offstage singing "A Froggie." Huckleberry looking left.*) Say, here comes that new girl. I'm goin', 'cause wimmen is too onery nosey for me. So long, Tom, see you tonight.

[*Exits right.*]

TOM. Her name's Becky Thatcher, or somethin'. I hate girls too. I guess I'll go into the house. So long, Huckleberry, until night. (*Tom watches Huck exit, then he comes downstage to await Becky.*) I bet she'll notice me when I show her the rat. (*Tom takes the rat off the gate and holds it behind his back. Becky Thatcher enters left, singing, and jumping rope.*) Hello, you're the new girl around here, ain't yer? What's your name?

BECKY (*shyly*). Becky Thatcher. What's yours? Oh, I know. It's Thomas Sawyer.

TOM. That's the name they lick me by. I'm Tom when I'm good. You call me Tom, will you?

BECKY (*shyly*). Yes.

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TOM. Becky, do you love rats?

BECKY (*shivers at the thought of it*). No, I hate them.

TOM. Well, I do too — live ones. But I mean dead ones, to swing around your head with a string, like this.

[*Tom swings the dead rat around his head.*]

BECKY (*terrified, screams and runs away, hiding behind barrel*). Take it away! Take it away! Take it away!

TOM (*crushed by his failure to impress Becky; he throws the rat over the fence*). Sorry, Becky. I thought you'd like it. It's gone, Becky, I threw it over the fence.

BECKY (*with the rat safely over the fence, Becky ventures to come out from behind the barrel*). No, I don't care for rats — much, anyhow. What I like is chewing gum.

TOM. Oh, I should say so. I wish I had some now.

BECKY. Do you? I've got some. I'll let you chew it awhile, but you must give it back to me.

[*Becky takes a stick of gum from her apron pocket and offers it to Tom. She resumes her jumping.*]

TOM (*taking gum*). Gee, thanks. Becky, was you ever at a circus?

BECKY. Yes, and my Pa's going to take me again sometime, if I'm good.

TOM (*jumping with Becky*). I've been to a circus three or four times — lots of times. There's things goin' on at a circus all the time. I'm going to be a clown when I grow up.

[*Tom stops jumping; a sudden thought comes to him. He takes a piece of wood and a penknife out of his back pocket, and as he walks towards right, he carves the wood.*]

BECKY. Oh, are you? That will be nice. They look so lovely all spotted up.

TOM (*busy carving*). Yes, that's so. And they get slatters of money, too. Most a dollar a day, Johnny Miller says.

BECKY (*curiosity gets the best of Becky; she stops jumping and goes over to Tom*). What are you doing?

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TOM (*turning away a bit, trying to make light of what he is doing*). Oh, I'm just carving something on wood.

BECKY (*very curious*). Let me see it?

TOM (*holds the wood he is carving closer to his body, away from Becky's sight*). Oh, it ain't anything.

BECKY (*persisting*). Yes, it is.

TOM. No, it ain't. You don't want to see it.

BECKY. Yes, I do. Please let me.

TOM (*finished carving, holds stick behind his back*). You'll tell.

BECKY. No, I won't, 'deed and 'deed and double 'deed, I won't. Now let me?

TOM. You won't tell anybody at all? Ever, as long as you live?

BECKY. No, I won't ever tell anybody. Now let me?

TOM (*teasing Becky*). Oh, you don't want to see it.

BECKY (*angrily*). Now that you treat me so, I will see it. (*She grabs the stick from behind Tom's back and reads the carved lettering on it aloud.*) I—love . . .

[*Blushing to the roots of her hair, Becky does not finish the sentence, but drops the stick and runs upstage with her back to Tom and her face covered with her apron.*]

TOM (*picking up the stick and finishing the sentence aloud*). You! (*Tom puts the stick in his back pocket. There is a pause; then Tom speaks very softly.*) Becky. (*No answer.*) Becky. (*Still no answer.*) Becky, was you ever engaged?

BECKY (*with her back to Tom, she responds shyly*). What's that?

TOM (*coming closer*). Why, engaged to be married.

BECKY (*still shy*). No.

TOM. Would you like to?

BECKY. I reckon so. I don't know. What is it like?

TOM. Like? Why, it ain't like anything. You only just tell a boy you won't ever have anybody but him, ever, ever, and forever; and then you kiss, that's all. Anybody can do it.

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BECKY (*a bit puzzled*). Kiss? What do you kiss for?

TOM. Why, that, you know — is to . . . (*Girls always ask the darndest questions.*) Well, they always do that.

BECKY. Everybody?

TOM. Why, yes, everybody that's in love with each other.

Becky, do you remember what I carved on the stick?

BECKY (*blushing again*). Ye-yes.

TOM (*coming still closer*). What was it?

BECKY (*turning away*). I shan't tell you.

TOM. Shall I tell *you*?

BECKY. Ye-yes, but some other time.

TOM. No, now.

BECKY. No, not now — tomorrow.

TOM (*disappointed*). Oh, no — now. Please, Becky.

I'll whisper it. (*Becky shakes her bowed head. Tom continues to speak.*) I'll whisper it ever so easy.

BECKY. No, Tom.

TOM. Oh, please, Becky. (*Tom leans over and whispers into Becky's ear, "I love you." Becky is overcome with embarrassment; covers her face with her apron.*) Now you whisper it to me — just the same, Becky. (*Becky pulls away.*) Oh, come on, Becky.

BECKY (*with her head still bowed, she turns towards Tom*). .

You turn your face away, so that you can't see, and then

I will. (*Shyly turns her face up to Tom.*) But you mustn't ever tell anybody — will you, Tom? Now, you won't, will you?

TOM. No, indeed, indeed I won't. (*He turns his face away.*) Now, Becky.

[*Becky very timidly whispers, "I love you," into Tom's ear, then she runs up left, and hides her face in her apron.*]

TOM (*all smiles*). Now, Becky, it's all over — all but the kiss. (*Goes over to Becky.*) Don't be afraid of that; it ain't anything at all. Please, Becky! (*There is no answer, so Tom puts his hands on Becky's shoulders and turns her towards him, then he gently takes her hands away from her face. He is about to kiss her, but stops*

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to look up and then down the road to make sure no one is about. Finding no one in sight, he quickly gives Becky a slight peck on the cheek. Then with a sigh of relief and triumph, he speaks.) Now it's all over, Becky. And always after this, you know, you ain't ever to love anybody but me, ever, ever, and forever, will you?

BECKY (*shyly*). No, I'll never love anybody but you, Tom. And I'll never marry anybody but you, and you're not to ever marry anybody but me, either.

TOM (*all smiles*). Certainly, of course.

[Tom takes Becky by the hand and they swing hands as they walk towards right.]

TOM. That's part of it. And always coming to school, or when we're going home, you're to walk with me — when there ain't anybody looking — and you choose me and I choose you at parties, because that's the way you do when you're engaged.

BECKY. It's so nice. I never heard of it before.

TOM (*walking on air*). Why, it's ever so gay! Why, me an Amy Laurence . . .

[Tom clamps his hand over his mouth. He realizes he has said too much.]

BECKY (*with a startled cry*). Oh, Tom! Then I'm not the only girl you've ever been engaged to.

[She turns away from Tom and bursts into tears.]

TOM (*ashamed, not knowing what to say*). Oh, don't cry, Becky. I don't care for her anymore.

BECKY (*crying bitterly*). Yes, you do, Tom; you know you do.

TOM (*puts his hand gently on Becky's shoulder to turn her around. But she pulls away*). Becky, I don't care for anybody but you. (*Pleadingly.*) Becky — Becky, won't you say something? (*Becky is inconsolable. Tom takes a door-knob from out of his pocket, breathes heavily on it, then rubs it on his overalls to give it a polish.*) I have something for you, Becky.

BECKY. I don't want it!

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TOM. Please, Becky, won't you take it?

[Puts door-knob into Becky's hand.]

BECKY *(throws the door-knob to the ground)*. Oh, go away! Go away!

TOM *(picks up door-knob; puts it back into his pocket. He makes an attempt to speak, but loses courage. Then he remembers the chewing-gum. He takes it out of his mouth and puts it into Becky's hand)*. Becky, here's your chewing-gum.

[Utterly crushed, he walks through the gate and out of sight. Becky, still weeping, senses she is alone, and turns to find Tom gone.]

BECKY. Tom! *(She runs to the gate, climbs up on it and calls.)* Tom! Tom, come back! Tom! *(But to no avail. Crying bitterly, she gets off the gate and comes downstage.)* Amy Laurence! *(She puts the gum in her mouth.)* Amy Laurence! *(She bends down and picks up her rope.)* Me — and Amy Laurence! *[Crying bitterly, she runs offstage left.]*

Curtain

A SHARE IN FREEDOM

By

ESTHER E. OLSON

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CAST

BUD ALLEN, *a high school boy, anywhere from 13 to 17*

MARION ALLEN, *his older sister*

PATSY ALLEN, *his younger sister*

MRS. ALLEN, *his mother*

MR. ALLEN, *his father*

JIMMIE COLBY, *a soldier*

TIME. Early evening.

PLACE. The Allen's living room.

A SHARE IN FREEDOM

It is early evening at the Allen menage. The male members are relaxed in the living room, while the feminine members of the household are still in the kitchen cleaning up the debris from the night's onslaught on food. Mr. Allen, a fortyish man, is ensconced in the large upholstered chair at the right stage, where a floor lamp obligingly beams over his shoulder. Mr. Allen, naturally, is reading the evening paper. Bud, his teen-aged son, believes one thing which he's learned at school, and that is that one should recline directly after a heavy meal to let the food digest. Hence, we see him sprawled out on the davenport left. One arm is thrown over his head, one foot is resting on the floor, the other on the back of the davenport.

On a table back of the davenport and against the left wall is a telephone. Near it is a small chair. At the back wall and to the left of the door is a radio; to the right a bookcase. A chair is nearly center right. There are three doors: one at the center back leading to the outdoors; one at the left leading to the kitchen; and the third to the right leading to the upstairs. About the room are other chairs, stools, and the common knick-knacks that make a house a home.

When the curtain rises, there is a moment's pause. Then the telephone rings. Mr. Allen, looking sternly at his son and seeing no sign of activity, rises with a martyred air, lays aside his paper and his glasses, and crosses the room to answer it.

BUD (*yawning*). If it's Blondie, I'm not at home. If it's Fuffy, I am. Definitely. And if it's Toodles, you don't know — you'll see.

MR. ALLEN (*in phone*). Hello. Oh, yes, Frank. Fine.

A SHARE IN FREEDOM

How are you? Do I want to buy a couple of tires? Why do you ask that? Oh, I see. Sure, I can always use a couple of spares. Mine are all good, but you never can tell how long they are going to last. You're sure I won't get into any trouble about it? Where does he get them? I see. A little political pull, eh? O.K. Put me down for two. Thanks, Frank. Good-bye.

[He hangs up receiver, recrosses to his chair, and resumes interest in his paper.]

BUD. Hey, Dad!

[Holds out palm towards father, wriggling fingers.]

MR. ALLEN. What do you want?

BUD (*tapping palm with other hand*). Place it on the life-line.

MR. ALLEN. What kind of talk is that?

BUD. Cross the palm. Pay me what you owe me.

MR. ALLEN. I don't owe you anything!

BUD (*now sits up; both feet on davenport*). But, my most venerable progenitor, you do. It becomes very painful for me to have to remind you that yesterday you were a bit short of ready cash. Gave me a verbal I.O.U. There's still fifty cents due me on my weekly stipend.

MR. ALLEN. You mean your allowance?

BUD. Some people might call it that. I call it a pittance.

MR. ALLEN. Then get up and ask for it in a respectable way.

BUD (*rises*). You insist on formality?

MR. ALLEN. I insist on respect.

BUD (*stands respectfully before his father, bows slightly, and speaks in exaggerated politeness*). Please, my honorable pater, if it is entirely convenient for you to consider the matter of finances, may I respectfully remind you that on this day of our Lord, one thousand nine hundred and forty-three, there is a little obligation relative to the filthy lucre called money . . .

MR. ALLEN (*with disgust*). Oh, hush! Here.

[Tosses him the coin.]

A SHARE IN FREEDOM

BUD. Thanks, esteemed dispenser of the family payroll.

[*He hurries to the telephone.*]

MR. ALLEN. And see that you spend it wisely.

BUD. You leave that to me. Earning's your department.

Spending's mine. (*In phone.*) Cloverdale 7772.

(*Pause.*) As right as Roosevelt, honey.

MR. ALLEN. Don't be so fresh to the operator.

BUD. She likes it. (*In phone.*) Hello, gorgeous. Apollo speaking. (*He has twisted himself around in the chair so that he now stretches a foot out to the davenport back, thus making a kind of suspension bridge.*) What do you think, beautiful? I'm a capitalist again. Yes, Dad just paid up his debt. Want to help me spend it? Well, there's always the movies — twenty cents a head. That's forty cents for the two of us, and that leaves a ten-cent balance for two nickel cokes.

[*Mrs. Allen enters from right.*]

MRS. ALLEN. Bud Allen! Take your feet off the furniture!

BUD (*shushing her*). What'd you say, peaches?

MRS. ALLEN (*takes hold of his feet and places them on floor*). Don't they teach you any manners up at high school?

BUD. Can't hear you, bright eyes. The maternal volcano is erupting . . .

MR. ALLEN (*rises*). Young man, don't you talk like that about your mother.

BUD (*into phone*). So's the paternal volcano. See you later. Drop around and we'll spend my petty cash.

[*Hangs up.*]

MR. ALLEN. And another thing — if you're going to take a girl to a show, why do you have *her* call for *you*?

BUD. 'S easier. She's got the car and the gas.

[*Goes back to davenport.*]

MRS. ALLEN. Honestly, Bud, I don't know what kind of teachers you can have. Do they let you act like that around school?

A SHARE IN FREEDOM

BUD. Sure.

MR. ALLEN (*turns back to right*). But don't they say anything?

BUD. Sure.

MR. ALLEN. What?

BUD. They say, "Do your parents let you act like that around home?"

MR. ALLEN (*sits and resumes reading of paper*). Humph!

MRS. ALLEN (*goes to door right and calls*). Marion, put some of that hot soup in a jar. I'll take it over to Mrs. Colby.

MR. ALLEN (*exclaiming over paper*). Well! For land's sakes!

BUD. Bet one of Dad's old girl friends has made the headlines again.

MRS. ALLEN. Bud, for goodness' sakes, I wish you wouldn't be so flippant.

MR. ALLEN. This is nothing to wise-crack about. Dick Parker — that's John Parker's boy — remember, Charlotte? He was a classmate of mine.

MRS. ALLEN. Of course! What's happened to Dick?

MR. ALLEN. Missing at sea.

MRS. ALLEN. How dreadful. He was such a promising young boy. Was going to be a doctor —
[*She goes over to read over her husband's shoulder.*]

MR. ALLEN (*points it out; then reads it aloud*). "Airplane was known not to have been equipped with a rubber life boat because of a shortage of these crafts. It is believed that the entire crew is lost." Huh! No rubber life boat! That's outrageous!

MRS. ALLEN (*walking left*). That's terrible! Those poor boys!

MR. ALLEN. Guess I'd better send John a card of sympathy.

MRS. ALLEN. I'll buy one for you when I go out. Oh, that reminds me, Henry, could you let me have ten dollars?

A SHARE IN FREEDOM

MR. ALLEN (*feeling in pocket*). Guess so. Grocery money give out?

MRS. ALLEN. Well, you see, I want to take some of the girls out for lunch tomorrow. We're going to the Alpine Chateau. And there's a nylon sale . . .

MR. ALLEN (*passing her a bill*). Why don't you feed the girls some sandwiches here at home? Lots cheaper.

MRS. ALLEN. Oh, Henry . . .

[*Marion enters from right.*]

MARION (*handing soup to her mother*). Here, Mother. It's nice and . . . (*Sees her father.*) Oh, Dad! There you are! Gee, am I glad you're home.

MR. ALLEN. Is your allowance due, too?

MARION (*innocently*). What?

MR. ALLEN. I thought I paid you yesterday.

MARION. Oh, no, that wasn't my allowance! That was for a new hat I . . .

MR. ALLEN. A new hat? Great scott, you're always buying hats!

BUD (*rising from his lethargy*). Say! If you gave her money for a new hat, I'm going to get that jacket . . .

MRS. ALLEN. You'll get it, Bud. For your birthday . . .

MARION. Don't howl before you're pinched.

BUD. Just the same, you always get more . . .

MRS. ALLEN. Oh, let's not start that again. I'll run over with this soup for Mrs. Colby. Since she's been working for the refugees, I'll just bet she never takes time at night to cook herself a good hot meal.

MARION. What has she heard from Jimmie lately?

MRS. ALLEN. Nothing — since she had that telegram from Washington that Gordon was killed in action.

MR. ALLEN. I guess Mrs. Colby's doing her bit, all right.

MRS. ALLEN. She's only got Jimmie left now. Well, I'll hurry over before this soup gets cold. If Patsy gets through with the dishes before I come back, tell her to go to her room and study.

BUD. Smart idea.

A SHARE IN FREEDOM

MARION. It'd be just as smart for you to do the same.

BUD. Oh, yeah? What about you . . .

MRS. ALLEN. Now, children, don't start *that!* If anybody calls about tomorrow, tell them it's the Alpine Chateau.

[She exits.]

MARION. Well, what about it, Dad?

MR. ALLEN. What about what?

MARION. Now, don't be such an innocent lamb, Daddy dear. You know I've just got to have . . .

[Patsy skips in from right.]

PATSY. O.K. Got the dishes done! *(Sees her father, runs to him and throws her arms about his neck. She might even plant a big kiss on his cheek.)* Oh, hello, Daddy! Gee! Am I glad you're staying home tonight!

MR. ALLEN *(an automaton, he reaches for his pocket)*. How much?

PATSY *(extending palm)*. A dime.

MARION *(also extends palm towards him)*. Me, too, Dad.

MR. ALLEN. Say, can't you kids do anything but stretch out your palms? What in the world do you do with all the money I hand out to you?

BUD. I'm taking Splendiferous to the show tonight. "She Couldn't Love Twice."

MR. ALLEN *(in disgust)*. Trash!

BUD. No — tragedy!

MARION. And I've got to have a dollar for some nail polish.

MR. ALLEN *(exploding)*. A dollar? For nail polish?

MARION. Sure. It lasts a long time.

[She wafts her hands gracefully in the air as she appraises them.]

PATSY. And I want some ice cream. Can I go to the drug store now, Daddy?

MR. ALLEN. I don't know. Wait until your mother comes back.

MARION. She said you had to go to your room and study.

A SHARE IN FREEDOM

PATSY. Morbid idea! It'll only take me a minute to run to the drug store, Daddy.

MR. ALLEN. Seems like a terrific waste of money — to put it all in your stomachs or on your finger nails or on some hotsy-totsy movie.

BUD. Have to keep up the old morale, Pop, during this reconstruction period.

MR. ALLEN. Really? I didn't think you kids knew that.

PATSY. Sure I know it! Look what I've done for my government! (*She displays a cut finger.*) Tying bundles!

MR. ALLEN (*now lays aside his paper permanently*). And what have *you* done, my Dresden lady?

MARION. Me? Plenty. I went around one whole evening begging for the Junior Red Cross.

MR. ALLEN. And you think that pays your debt to America? (*To Bud.*) And you, my Flaming Youth, what have *you* done to promote the cause of Freedom?

BUD. Who? Me? I sang "God Bless America" in the assembly for the relief drive.

MR. ALLEN. But did you *give* anything?

BUD (*matching his coin on back of his hand*). How could I? I never have any money.

MR. ALLEN. You would have, if you didn't spend it all on pleasure.

BUD. Oh, Pop, don't be an old kill-joy.

MR. ALLEN (*rising*). You know what I think of you kids. I think you're all a bunch of self-centered, selfish, and pampered . . .

PATSY. Brats.

MR. ALLEN. Well, I wasn' going to say anything that strong. And then, again, maybe I was, too. But if you think that singing a few patriotic songs or collecting old clothing is enough to do, you're mighty mistaken. If that's all you care for Freedom, if Liberty and the preservation of it doesn't mean a few sacrifices, then

A SHARE IN FREEDOM

you're going to wake up some day to the realization that we've lost it!

MARION. Well, goodness, Dad, what else can we do?

PATSY. We girls can't enlist now.

BUD. Gee whiz, Pop, I'm not old enough.

MR. ALLEN. Don't hide behind alibis like that! Every one of you can do something vital to preserve Freedom.

CHILDREN. What?

MR. ALLEN. You can buy a share in peace, with the nickels and dimes and quarters and dollars you spend every day on foolish pleasures.

PATSY. Aw, gee, Daddy, what can a dime do?

[She looks at him appealingly.]

MARION. And a dollar is a mere drop in the bucket. Now if you'd give me five dollars every week . . .

BUD. Sure! That's it! Give me the money, and I'll buy some food for the starving.

MR. ALLEN. You're an able bodied boy. What's the matter with your getting out and earning it?

BUD. Me? How could I do that?

MR. ALLEN. I happen to know that Mrs. Colby next door would like a boy to tend to her yard. She'll pay fifty cents a week.

BUD. Only fifty cents? Why, that'd take me months just to . . . *(Door opens. Mrs. Allen enters, followed by Jimmie Colby.)* Look! Jimmie Colby's home!

[Jimmie Colby steps inside. His right sleeve hangs limp. His head is bandaged. The children crowd around him.]

EVERYONE. Jimmie! Welcome home! Well, this is a surprise! When did you get back?

JIMMIE. Hello, folks! Just got back tonight, and I can only stay a moment. Just ran over to say hello.

MR. ALLEN *(shaking his left hand)*. Well, we're sure glad to see you, Jimmie!

PATSY. Tell us about the war, Jimmie!

JIMMIE. I wish I could, I wish I could tell you everything.

A SHARE IN FREEDOM

How those fellows out there fought like heroes. How — how — I saw my own brother die!

MR. ALLEN (*pats his shoulder*). We know, Jimmie. Your brother was a wonderful young man!

JIMMIE. He was my commanding officer, you know. We'd had a tough battle with the Japs, and when it was all over, Gordon saw me lying out there in a fox hole. That — that was when this happened.

[He indicates his empty sleeve.]

MR. ALLEN. We're mighty sorry, Jimmie.

JIMMIE. Gordon went out to bring me in — and — suddenly from somewhere loomed a Jap. Gordie saw him first and whipped out his gun and fired — but his gun was empty. His last bullet was gone!

BUD. Jiminy!

MRS. ALLEN. How awful!

JIMMIE. If somewhere in these United States, some school kid had spent ten cents for war stamps so my brother could have had one more bullet, his life would have been spared. But the Japs got him.

MARION. How terrifying! Ten cents between life — and death!

JIMMIE. And then the Jap saw me, but I was ready. Somehow, with my left hand, I'd got hold of my gun and let her go. He toppled over, but I wasn't sure he was dead, so I was going to give him another, just in case. But my gun was empty, too! You see, we'd been running low on ammunition out there. But, thank God, my first one got him, and I'm here to tell the tale. If my gun had been empty too . . .

[He is unable to finish. Everyone is tremendously impressed.]

MR. ALLEN. I guess we folks back home didn't know how much you needed our help.

JIMMIE. America is the grandest country on earth, Mr. Allen. You realize that when you're away from it. America is worth dying for; and she's worth living for!

A SHARE IN FREEDOM

She's worth every sacrifice we can make to keep her a great nation. Good-night.

MR. ALLEN. Good-night, Jimmie.

OTHERS. Good-night.

[Jimmie hurries out the door. There is a heavy pause as his footsteps recede.]

PATSY *(with a sick expression)*. I don't think I want any ice cream. I — I wish I'd been spending all my dimes for war stamps so — so Gordon Colby could be living — now.

MARION *(spreads out her fingers and surveys them)*. Red finger nails, that cost a dollar. Isn't it funny what a moment or two can do to your whole life? Finger nails used to be terribly important to me. They aren't now. It's *having* fingers that's important, fingers and hands and arms! And what color they are is never going to make the slightest difference again! *(Turns to father.)* You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to invest that dollar in Freedom! For Mrs. Colby's refugees!

BUD *(sits thoughtfully)*. I don't feel like going to a movie. I — I wonder if Donna would mind if I spent that fifty cents for . . .

MRS. ALLEN. You were right, Henry. The girls can come here and eat sandwiches tomorrow, and I can wait for nylons a while longer. This ten dollars is going to Mrs. Colby's refugees.

MR. ALLEN. I guess even I have been too content to let the other fellow do the work of preserving this land. I'm going to cancel that order for those tires. Probably black market! Maybe that rubber will go to make a raft so that no more Dick Parkers need to go down to the bottom of the Pacific because *I* didn't do my duty! So what about it, folks — you, out there in the audience. Are you willing to buy a share in Freedom?

[Bud, or maybe someone else, or perhaps all of them, break out in the singing of "God Bless America," or some other patriotic song as the curtain falls.]

ANGEL CHILD

By

JAMES REACH

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CAST

SADIE, *a maid*

AMY CRAMER, *an angel child*

KENNY CRAMER, *her brother*

MRS. CRAMER, *their mother*

PHYLLIS CRAMER, *Amy's sister*

ERIC WILLIAMS, *Phyllis' boy friend*

TIME. Evening of a spring day in the present year.

PLACE. The action of the play takes place in the living room of the Cramer's home, located in a small Mid-Western city.

ANGEL CHILD

It is the living room of the Cramers' home, located in a small Mid-Western city. The room is neatly and pleasantly furnished, with an eye toward comfort rather than style. The main entrance to the room is an arch, midway in the back wall. This leads, at the left, to the front door, and, at the right, to a staircase to the upper storey; neither front door nor staircase need to be visible from the auditorium, unless desired. Another door, well downstage in the right wall, leads to the kitchen and dining room, and there are windows in the left wall. There is a large divan in the corner up right, with a coffee table in front of it and a floor lamp behind. In the corner up left, a flat-top desk and desk chair; on the desk, a telephone. A small round table stage center, with table lamp on it. Two easy chairs, left and right of table, respectively, and a third in the corner down left, with a floor lamp upstage of it. A console radio against the right wall, below the door. Books, pictures, ash stands and bric-a-brac as desired.

Sadie is discovered on stage, straightening up. She doesn't seem very interested in her work, merely giving the furniture a perfunctory slap from time to time with her dust cloth.

AMY (after a moment runs in, excitedly). Hey, Sadie!

What time is it?

SADIE. Is late.

AMY. Sure, sure — but *how* late?

SADIE. Is very late. Is time I go. Your mama thinks I work overtime, but I tell her: "No, sir, Missis Cramer, tonight I don't work. Tonight I . . ."

AMY. Okay, okay! (*Walks impatiently toward radio.*)

All I wanna know, is it eight o'clock yet?

[*Turns on switch on radio.*

ANGEL CHILD

SADIE. No, is about twenty after seven.

AMY. Is *that* all? (*Turns switch off again.*) Huh!
And I ran all the way from the corner because I thought
it was late. (*Crosses to table.*) I got more 'n half an
hour yet before he comes on.

SADIE. Comes on what?

AMY (*picks up newspaper from the table and stands looking at it*). On the radio, stupid!

SADIE. Someone comes on radio? Who it is?

AMY. At eight o'clock. You know who comes on at eight
o'clock.

SADIE. No.

AMY (*unable to believe her ears*). Goodness willikens! I
thought *every* dope knew that.

SADIE. Not me. I make guess, yes? (*Concentrates.*)
Maybe is Andy and Amos, yes?

AMY. No, not Amos and Andy, stupid! It's — it's *him*.
(*Her face aglow with a far-away look.*) Mr. Sinatra!

SADIE (*blankly*). Is dot so?

AMY. Frank!

SADIE. Oh, dot's right. (*Swatting at the furniture again
with the dust cloth.*) The crooncher.

AMY. "Crooner!"

SADIE. Poddon me!

AMY (*the blissful look on her face*). He's only the greatest
man who ever lived, that's all.

SADIE. Greater yet as Abraham Lincoln?

AMY (*disdainfully*). Huh! Could Abraham Lincoln
croon?

SADIE. I dunno.

AMY. I'll see what they say about him in tonight's paper.
[*Crosses with it to the divan and sprawls out; starts to
turn the pages.*]

KENNY (*after a moment calls from offstage*). Mom!
(*Hurries on. He is wearing the black trousers of a
tuxedo suit and a stiff shirt and collar, which are much*

ANGEL CHILD

too large for him. He is holding the loose ends of a black bow tie.) Where's Mom, Sadie?

SADIE. In the kitchen, helping me with the dishes.

KENNY. Helping *you*, huh? (*Starts for door, calling.*) Mom! Mom!

MRS. CRAMER (*at same time enters*). All right, I'm not deaf, Kenny. (*Looks him over in amazement.*) Well, heavenly days!

AMY (*looks up and giggles*). Where'd you get the *tent*?

KENNY. Now, no wisecracks from you, infant.

MRS. CRAMER. I suppose there's some explanation for this?

KENNY. Oh, sure! Just tie this tie for me, will yuh, Mom? That's all I want *you* to do.

MRS. CRAMER. Kenneth Cramer, what are you doing in your father's best pants?

KENNY. Can't yuh see? Wearing 'em.

MRS. CRAMER (*looking him over carefully*). And his shirt, and his collar and tie?

KENNY (*wriggling impatiently*). Aw, Mom! This is no time for a lot of talk. I got an important engagement.

MRS. CRAMER. Answer my question, Kenny.

KENNY. Well, I borrowed 'em. Naturally.

MRS. CRAMER. Borrowed them? And does your father know that?

KENNY (*evasively*). We — had a discussion.

MRS. CRAMER. And what did he say?

KENNY. He didn't say I couldn't.

MRS. CRAMER. He most certainly didn't say you *could*. I seem to remember that very plainly.

KENNY (*desperately*). Mom! I tell you I got no time to argue. You want me to go to the dance *naked*?

AMY. That would be some thrill.

KENNY. Shut up, you!

MRS. CRAMER. Wear your nice blue suit.

KENNY (*horrified*). To the Easter Dance? The most

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important one of the whole year? You want me to be a laughing-stock, Mom? And what would Clarissa say?

MRS. CRAMER. Clarissa?

AMY. Clarissa Schultz. He calls her his pin-up girl, and she calls him lambkins. Ugh!

[*Kenny shoots her a murderous look.*]

MRS. CRAMER. Well, I'm sorry . . .

KENNY (*bitterly*). You won't buy me a tux of my own. You seem to think I'm still a kid. You forget I'm *seventeen*. All the other boys have 'em — every single one but me.

MRS. CRAMER (*adamant*). You'll just have to get your father's permission, Kenny.

KENNY. Okay, where is he?

MRS. CRAMER. At the factory, working late. Tonight of all nights, with tomorrow Easter Sunday . . .

KENNY. Well, how can I ask him if he's working?

MRS. CRAMER (*querulously*). You'd think he has the whole world on his shoulders, the way he sticks to that factory, night and day.

SADIE (*takes a slap at the furniture with what looks like an air of finality*). I go now, Missis Cramer.

MRS. CRAMER. What?

KENNY (*simultaneously with Sadie's speech above*). He won't even know I'm borrowing it. Come on, tie the tie, will yuh, Mom?

MRS. CRAMER. What did you say, Sadie?

SADIE. I go now.

MRS. CRAMER. Oh, dear! There's so much to be done yet. I don't suppose you could? . . .

SADIE (*shakes her head*). I go.

KENNY. But, Mom . . .

MRS. CRAMER (*ignoring him*). Well, if you must, you must. Er, Sadie, would you consider coming in for just a little while in the morning?

SADIE. Is my day off.

MRS. CRAMER. Yes, I know, but . . .

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KENNY. Mom! Will you *kindly* lissen to something important?

MRS. CRAMER. This *is* important. Just for a couple of hours, Sadie? We'd pay you, of course, and . . .

SADIE (*shakes her head firmly*). Is my day off. I go now, Missis Cramer.

[*Crosses and exits.*]

MRS. CRAMER. But Sadie!

[*Hurries off after her.*]

KENNY. Mom! (*Crosses.*) Oh, don't go way, Angel Child. I hafta talk to you.

AMY. Don't worry, I won't. (*As he exits.*) Not till eight o'clock!

[*Looks through paper.*]

PHYLLIS (*after a few moments enters*). You here, Amy?

AMY. Uh-huh! (*Phyllis sighs and, looking woebegone, drags herself across to chair left and sits in it. Amy finishes with the newspaper, throws it aside with an expression of disgust.*) Some paper! Not a thing in it about him — not a single thing.

PHYLLIS. About whom?

AMY. Mr. Sinatra, of course!

PHYLLIS. Oh, him!

[*Sighs deeply.*]

AMY (*shoots her a look*). Say, what's the matter with you?

PHYLLIS. Nothing.

AMY. Ain't you interested in Mr. Sinatra any more?

PHYLLIS. Not very.

AMY. That's what's the matter with you women: you're so fickle. Well, he's still got me.

PHYLLIS. Has he?

AMY. You bet! And you know what I'm gonna do to him some day? I'm gonna marry him.

PHYLLIS (*smiles wanly*). Don't be absurd, child.

AMY. Okay, but you'll see. They said Edison was absurd, too, didn't they?

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PHYLLIS. In the first place, he's already got a wife, and in the second place, he hasn't got the remotest idea you're even alive.

AMY. He will have. (*Confidently.*) I got my ways. I generally get what I go after.

PHYLLIS. I know you do, but I'd like to see you get Frank Sinatra.

AMY. You just wait and see, that's all. (*Short pause. Phyllis sighs again.*) Boy, you look like you just came from a *wake*.

PHYLLIS. I'm sorry my looks don't meet with your approval, Amy.

AMY. Oh, I guess it's no skin off my teeth. Well, as long as you're here, we might as well take care of a little business.

PHYLLIS. Business?

AMY. Uh-huh! (*Gets out a small memo book from her pocket.*) Now, lemme see. Oh, here we are. You owe me — uh — seventy cents for this week.

PHYLLIS. Do I?

AMY. Yeah, twenty-five cents for leaving you alone in here with Oswald Wednesday night, twenty-five for not telling what I heard Johnny say to you that time, and twenty cents you didn't have last week and said you'd give me this week.

PHYLLIS. All right, you'll get it. Mom hasn't given me my allowance yet.

AMY (*looks at her*). Ain't you even gonna put up an argument?

PHYLLIS. No.

AMY. Goodness willikens! You *have* got it bad. What's the matter, Phyl?

PHYLLIS. Nothing, not a single thing, I tell you.

AMY. Hey, why ain't you getting dolled up?

PHYLLIS. What for?

AMY. What for? For the dance, of course.

PHYLLIS. Oh, I (*Sighs.*) I'm not going to the dance, Amy.

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AMY. Not *going*? 'Course you're going. You got a date with Eric Williams. You been writing letters back and forth for a month just about tonight.

PHYLLIS. How did *you* know that?

AMY. I got my ways. When you're in business like me, you gotta have contacts.

PHYLLIS. Well, Eric and I haven't got a date. It's — it's been called off.

AMY. Why?

PHYLLIS. I don't think that's any of your business.

AMY. Maybe it is.

PHYLLIS (*a heart-broken look on her face*). If he wants to throw himself away on the first female that happens along, then I guess I'm just not interested in him any more.

AMY. Who? Who's he throwing himself away on?

PHYLLIS. Wanda Pritchett, if it's any concern of yours.

AMY. That one? (*Phyllis nods.*) You mean he threw *you* over to take *her* to the dance? (*Phyllis nods sadly.*)

Boy, what a dope! Well, what are you doing about it?

PHYLLIS. Nothing.

AMY. You mean you're gonna take it laying down?

PHYLLIS (*alarmed at the tone of her voice*). Now, Amy, you stay out of this.

AMY. Lissen, Phyllis, you ain't very bright, but after all, you are my sister, and we Cramers hafta stick together.

PHYLLIS. Amy!

AMY. Besides, this is business. (*Jumps up and paces for a moment.*) Lissen, I got an idea. Would it be worth a dollar to you if Eric Williams took you to the dance tonight 'stead of Wanda Pritchett?

PHYLLIS. Certainly not! I . . .

AMY. Okay, okay, a half a dollar, then — but that's rock bottom!

PHYLLIS. I won't have you meddling in my affairs. Why, if Eric should find out, I'd be mortified.

AMY. Well, someone's gotta protect the honor of the

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CRAMERS, and you ain't woman enough. I'd even do it for nothing, only it's against my principles.

PHYLLIS (*weakening*). You mean — you really *have* got an idea?

AMY. You leave that to me. All you gotta do is get ready for the dance.

PHYLLIS. But . . .

MRS. CRAMER (*enters, followed by KENNY*). That Sadie! I wish I could afford the luxury of firing her.

KENNY (*his tie has been tied*). Mom . . .

MRS. CRAMER. The answer is still no, Kenny. It's enough I'm letting you wear your father's suit. I know he'll raise Halleluiah about that.

KENNY. But I'm not asking for much, Mom. Only five dollars.

MRS. CRAMER (*shakes her head*). Not five cents. Why, Phyllis, aren't you getting ready, dear?

PHYLLIS. Why (*Amy nudges her*.) I was just going to, Mom.

[*Rises, looks uncertainly at Amy, then crosses up to arch.*]

MRS. CRAMER. Oh, were you?

[*Phyllis exits.*]

AMY. Where's the phone book, Mom?

MRS. CRAMER. Somewhere in the desk, I suppose. What do you want with the phone book?

AMY. Oh, I gotta make a business call.

[*Goes to desk and looks through drawers.*]

KENNY. Mom, will you kindly lissen to reason?

MRS. CRAMER. I'm sorry; I've got too many things to do, Kenny.

[*Crosses to arch.*]

KENNY. You want everybody to think I'm a piker? My gosh, how'm I gonna explain it to Clarissa, coming to a swell dance like that with empty pockets?

MRS. CRAMER. You should have thought of that sooner.

ANGEL CHILD

You're two weeks ahead on your allowance now, and that's enough, Kenny.

KENNY. Well, how about *four* dollars? (*She shakes her head.*) Three? Two? One? (*She keeps shaking her head.*) Not even fifty cents?

MRS. CRAMER (*firmlly*). No! And that's final. Excuse me.

[*Exits.*]

KENNY (*groans*). Oh! The things a man's gotta contend with! I guess parents are necessary, but sometimes it makes yuh wonder.

AMY (*who has got the phone book out and is looking through it*). How many "I's" in Williams?

KENNY. Two. Lissen, Angel Child, I guess it's up to you now — I don't like to ask yuh, but I guess it is.

AMY. Later.

KENNY. But this is business. I got a little proposition for yuh, Amy.

AMY. Okay, okay! See me later. Can't you see I'm tied up right now?

KENNY. You won't go way, will yuh? (*She shakes her head.*) You better not, 'cause I'm depending on yuh — heaven help me!

[*Crosses and exits.*]

AMY (*takes the phone off the hook and dials a number. There is a short wait, then she speaks into the phone*). Hello, I would like to speak to Mr. Eric Williams. Okey-doke. (*Short pause.*) Hello, is this Mr. Williams? This is Miss Cramer. No, not Miss *Phyllis* Cramer — her sister. No, we ain't never met *socially*. Well, it's about *Phyllis*. Oh, she's feeling awful, Mr. Williams — *awful*. Well, I ain't saying she's exactly sick, but if you wanna see her again, you better hurry. She keeps saying your name; you know, like sick people do in the movies — she keeps saying, "Eric! Eric! Eric! My darling . . ."

ANGEL CHILD

SADIE (*enters, dressed for the street; crosses to arch and calls*). Missis Cramer!

AMY (*a hand over the receiver*). Sshh! Sadie!

SADIE. Poddon me!

AMY (*into phone*). What did you say, Mr. Williams? (*Her face lights up.*) You *will*? Right away? In about five minutes? Okey-doke. I gotta go back to her now. I'm nursing her, you know. G'bye!

[*Hangs up.*]

SADIE. Somebody comes here?

AMY. Oh, you wouldn't understand, Sadie. It's business. (*Picks up a magazine from the desk.*) So *that's* where my funny book got to.

[*Crosses with it and sprawls on the divan.*]

MRS. CRAMER (*at same time enters*). Did you call me, Sadie?

SADIE. I'm ready now. I go.

MRS. CRAMER. Oh, and I suppose you want your money?

SADIE (*nods*). I want.

MRS. CRAMER. Well, I've got it ready.

[*Reaches into her pocket, gets out some money and hands it to her.*]

SADIE (*counts it carefully*). Five, ten, fifteen . . .

MRS. CRAMER. It's all there.

SADIE (*laughs playfully*). Is better you be careful, no? Thanking you, Missis Cramer.

[*Puts it into her purse.*]

MRS. CRAMER. You're welcome. Sadie, can't I possibly prevail on you to help me out by coming in for a little while tomorrow morning?

SADIE (*stubbornly*). No. Is impossible.

MRS. CRAMER. Why?

SADIE. Must get my rest. Is working hard all week, so much rest one day, no?

MRS. CRAMER. Work *hard*? Well, I suppose you could say that. But — we do try to make it pleasant for you, and . . .

ANGEL CHILD

SADIE (*magnanimously*). Oh, sure! Is very finest peoples here. I give good recommendation.

MRS. CRAMER. You'll give *us* a good recommendation?

SADIE. You bet! When I leave, I give, no?

MRS. CRAMER (*fearfully*). Oh, Sadie! You're not thinking of leaving?

SADIE (*shrugs noncommittedly*). Is possible.

MRS. CRAMER. But why? Aren't you happy here?

SADIE. Oh, yes. Sure; is very fine peoples here. Only . . .

MRS. CRAMER. Only what?

SADIE. Only, must work too hard. All the time working hard is not good for the health, yes?

MRS. CRAMER. Well, I — I had no idea you felt that way, Sadie. Of course, we — we don't want you overworking yourself.

SADIE. No, is bad.

MRS. CRAMER. Yes. And — er — perhaps you — you could take it a little easier from now on.

SADIE (*smiles and nods*). Is good. I go now.

MRS. CRAMER. All right. And, Sadie, don't get here *too* early Monday morning.

SADIE. You bet! Don't worry, Missis Cramer, I don't.
[*Smiles and exits.*]

MRS. CRAMER. Heavenly days! What did I have to go and open my mouth for! (*Kenny enters. He has put on the tuxedo jacket, which is several sizes too large for him.*) And as for you, young man, don't say a word, not a word.

KENNY (*innocently*). Why, Mom, I wasn't gonna say anything.

MRS. CRAMER. Don't, because I'm in no mood for it.

[*Crosses angrily and exits.*]

KENNY. Now what's eating her?

AMY. I don't know. (*Muses.*) I bet, if Mr. Sinatra had Superman's suit, I bet he could fly, too.

KENNY. Huh? Say, what are you talking about?

AMY. Never mind. You wouldn't understand.

ANGEL CHILD

KENNY. Well look, Angel Child, how much money you got?

AMY. Not enough.

KENNY. What d'yuh mean, not enough?

AMY. Not enough to lend you five dollars.

KENNY. Okay, let's not beat about the bush. I'm in a hurry. What's the limit you could let me have?

AMY. I might scrape together a dollar seventy-five.

KENNY (*sighs*). Chicken feed, but it'll have to do. Hand it over.

AMY. Oh, no! It ain't as easy as that.

KENNY. What d'yuh mean?

AMY. How bad do you want it?

KENNY. Bad enough to pay the usual rate of interest.

AMY. Fifty percent?

KENNY. It's bloody murder, but you got me in a spot — you Shylock. Fifty percent.

AMY. Okey-doke. You know how much you owe me now?

KENNY (*grimaces*). Don't remind me of it.

AMY (*gets out her memo book*). Lemme see — here it is: "Account of Kenny Cramer" — uh — exactly four dollars and twenty-nine cents.

KENNY. What's that extra twenty-nine cents for? It was four dollars even, last I heard of it.

AMY. That's for getting that stamp the other day when I mailed that letter to your girl friend in Centerville.

KENNY. Okay, that's only four cents. Or has the price of stamps gone up?

AMY (*smiles*). The other twenty-five is for keeping my mouth shut about what was *inside* the letter.

KENNY (*angrily*). *What?* You opened it. Why, you — you little . . .

AMY. Uh-uh! Better watch what you're saying.

KENNY (*controls himself with a struggle*). Okay, okay, I owe yuh four dollars and twenty-nine cents.

AMY. *Plus* this dollar seventy-five.

KENNY. Yeah.

ANGEL CHILD

AMY. *And fifty percent interest.*

KENNY. Yeah, yeah! Just let me have it, that's all.

AMY (*hesitates*). I think I'll make you do something extra, just for losing your temper.

KENNY (*fearfully*). Now, wait! I ain't got time. Clarissa — I mean — I'm in an awful hurry.

AMY. Oh, this won't take long.

KENNY (*sighs*). Well, what is it?

AMY. All you gotta do is get down on your bended knees and kiss my foot.

KENNY. Oh, no! Oh, no, there's a limit; a man's gotta draw the line *some* time.

AMY (*shrugs*). Okey-doke! I guess it's no skin off my teeth.

KENNY. After all! After all — am I a man or a mouse?

AMY. If you want that dollar seventy-five, you're a mouse.

KENNY. Lissen, Angel Child, I'll do *anything* — anything but that.

AMY (*carelessly*). Suit yourself. Ho-hum!

[*Begins to look through funny book again.*]

KENNY (*furiously*). You're the — the — *nastiest* — the . . .

AMY. Uh-uh! Temper!

KENNY (*struggling to hold on to himself; between gritted teeth*). Okay! Okay, I'll do it. But — I'll never be able to look myself in the eye again.

AMY (*as he hesitates*). You better hurry up, before I think of something else.

KENNY (*as he gets down on his knees at her feet*). If Clarissa only knew the sacrifices I hadda make so she could have a banana split . . .

MRS. CRAMER (*hurries on and crosses to arch*). Kenny! What are you doing?

KENNY. Nothing!

MRS. CRAMER. T'st, t'st! Playing games — at your age. And in your father's best suit. What'll he think?

[*Exits.*]

ANGEL CHILD

AMY. Well — go ahead and kiss it.

KENNY. Yuh mean yuh *really* want me to?

AMY. Certainly!

KENNY. Sometimes I wonder what you got in the place your heart ought to be.

[Closes his eyes, quickly bends over and kisses her foot.]

AMY. Okey-doke!

KENNY. Can I get up now?

AMY. I guess so.

KENNY (*as he gets to his feet*). I guess I know how a worm feels now. Well, lemme have it.

AMY (*gets some money from her pocket. As she does so, the doorbell rings*). Oh, that's Eric Williams.

KENNY. Who? What's he doing here?

AMY. Never mind. I gotta let him in.

KENNY. I'll do it. I'm going now, anyway, if you'll just gimme that money.

AMY. Don't say anything to him. Just let him in.

KENNY. Okay, okay! (*Impatiently holds out his hand for the money, and she hands it to him.*) Thanks! It's the hardest I ever earned.

AMY (*smiles*). Well, have a good time.

KENNY (*crossing to arch*). I doubt it. I'll keep seeing myself — kissing your foot!

[Shudders and exits. Amy rises.]

ERIC (*a short wait, then he rushes in. He is wearing a tuxedo*). Where is she? Where is she?

AMY. How do you do? I guess you must be Mr. Williams.

ERIC. Yeah.

AMY. I'm Miss Cramer, Miss Amy Cramer.

ERIC. Huh? Say, are *you* the one I spoke to on the phone just now?

AMY. Uh-huh!

ERIC. Well, where's Phyllis? Can I see her? She isn't any worse, is she?

AMY. Oh, no.

ERIC (*remorsefully*). Poor kid! To think she'd be call-

ANGEL CHILD

ing out my name like that. Would you believe it, I didn't even know she was sick.

AMY. Well, she isn't.

ERIC. What?

AMY. I mean — she's not sick any more. She's — uh — she's better now.

ERIC. Better? You mean she's — *cured*?

AMY. Well, practically.

ERIC. But . . . (*Looks at Amy suspiciously.*) Hey, what is this, a joke?

AMY. Oh, no . . .

ERIC. First, you tell me over the phone she's dying . . .

AMY. I didn't say that, Mr. Williams.

ERIC. Well, you made me think so. Then, when I get here, I find out she's cured. Boy, I bet that was the quickest cure on record. As a matter of fact, I don't think she was ever sick at all, was she? Well, was she?

AMY (*hesitates, then shakes her head*). Huh-uh!

ERIC. Yeah, that's what I thought. Well, what's the big idea?

AMY. Just a little business proposition, Mr. Williams.

ERIC. *Business*? Say, are you nuts? Did Phyllis think this up all by herself, or did you help her?

AMY. Oh, she didn't think it up — she'd be too dumb to — I mean (*Sighs.*) I guess I better make a complete confession, Mr. Williams.

ERIC. Never mind; I haven't got the time.

[*Starts for arch.*]

AMY (*quickly*). No, don't go, Mr. Williams. I *gotta* talk to you.

ERIC. Well, what is it?

AMY. I just wanna ask you one thing: what's Wanda Pritchett got that Phyllis ain't?

ERIC. Huh? Is that supposed to be a riddle?

AMY. No, it ain't. I'm just asking yuh.

ERIC. Never mind about Wanda Pritchett. Is that *all* you had to say to me?

ANGEL CHILD

AMY. Nope. Lissen, I guess you don't know how many men asked Phyllis to marry her last week, do you? (*He shakes his head.*) Fifteen!

ERIC. *Fifteen?* What is she, in the wholesale end of it?

AMY. Well, maybe only ten . . .

ERIC. And maybe none.

AMY. No, honest, Mr. Williams, everybody thinks she'd make a *wonderful* wife. I guess you don't know what a swell cook she is. You oughta see her — uh — fry eggs.

ERIC (*laughs*). You're a funny kid, all right. You sure think a lot of your sister, don't you?

AMY. Uh-huh, fifty cents' worth!

ERIC. What?

AMY. I mean — I sure do think a lot of her.

ERIC. I do, too. She's a fine girl, one of the finest I ever met. And I guess I treated her like a heel.

AMY. Yeah.

ERIC. I don't guess she'd have anything more to do with me after that.

AMY. Oh, I don't know, Mr. Williams. She forgives awful easy.

ERIC. You think she might — I mean — where is she now?

AMY. Upstairs, getting dressed for the dance.

ERIC. Oh, she's got another date, huh?

AMY. Nope.

ERIC. Then why's she getting dressed for the dance?

AMY. Lissen, Mr. Williams, you wanna ask her yourself?

ERIC. Oh, no. I . . .

AMY (*crossing to arch*). It'll only take a minute. I'll send her right down.

ERIC. But . . .

AMY. You wait there. It'll only take a minute.

[*Runs out. There is a short wait, while Eric fidgets nervously about the stage; then Phyllis runs on. She is wearing a semi-formal dress and carries an evening wrap.*]

PHYLLIS. Hello, Eric. Amy said you wanted to ask me something.

ANGEL CHILD

ERIC. Yes, I — I — Gosh, you look nice, Phyllis.

PHYLLIS. Oh, do you really think so?

ERIC (*fervently*). I sure do.

PHYLLIS. Well — thanks, Eric.

ERIC. You're welcome. (*There is an awkward little pause. Embarrassedly.*) I — I guess you must think I'm an awful heel.

PHYLLIS. Oh, no. Why should I think that?

ERIC. Well — after the way I treated you, and all.

PHYLLIS. After all, a person's got a perfect right to change his mind if he wants to.

ERIC (*gulps*). But — I didn't want to.

PHYLLIS. Didn't you? It certainly seemed like you did.

ERIC. I mean — not really. And then, when your sister called me up and told me you were so sick, something hit me (*A hand in the general region of his heart.*) right in here.

PHYLLIS. Oh, so *that* was her idea. And you came here because you thought I was sick?

ERIC. Well, yes. Didn't you know?

PHYLLIS. I certainly did not. And I — I'm sorry you wasted your time, Mr. Williams. (*Not looking at him.*) Hadn't you better go? You don't want to be late for your date with Wanda Pritchett.

ERIC (*slight pause; miserably*). Listen, Phyllis. I'm — I'm *glad* I came over here now.

PHYLLIS. Are you?

ERIC. Yes. All the time, while I was away at school, I kept thinking of this date I had with you tonight and looking forward to it. And then I got in town the other day, and I happened to run into Wanda . . .

PHYLLIS (*her back still turned*). Oh, you just *happened* to run into her?

ERIC. That's the truth, whether you believe it or not. I ran into her, and we got talking, and — well, you know how Wanda is. The first thing I knew I had a date with

ANGEL CHILD

her. But — honest, Phyllis, I didn't *want* to make that date.

PHYLLIS. Then I guess you haven't got much will power.

ERIC. I know I haven't, but . . . Won't you look at me, Phyllis? (*She hesitates.*) Won't you?

PHYLLIS. Well . . .

[*Slowly turns and faces him.*]

ERIC. Listen, Phyllis: it's not too late yet. I know I don't deserve it, but — will you go to the dance with me?

[*Amy enters and stands in the arch listening, unseen by them.*]

PHYLLIS. How about Wanda?

ERIC. Oh, her! (*Makes a face.*) We'll stop at her house and I'll tell her I'm taking you. Will you come?

PHYLLIS. You're sure you really want me to?

ERIC. Positive!

PHYLLIS. Well . . . (*Slowly breaks into a smile.*) All right, then, Eric.

ERIC (*happily*). Gee, that's swell! We'll have a great time, you'll see. I gotta thank your little sister.

PHYLLIS. Yes, I guess she deserves the credit.

AMY (*coming down to them*). I'll take the cash.

PHYLLIS. Amy, have you been listening again?

ERIC. I want to thank you, Amy. You did me a big favor tonight.

PHYLLIS. Both of us.

ERIC. I don't know how I can ever repay you.

AMY. Well, is it worth . . .

PHYLLIS (*cuts her off*). Amy! Hadn't we better be going, Eric?

ERIC. Yeah, I guess so; it's getting late.

[*He and Phyllis cross to arch.*]

MRS. CRAMER (*enters*). Oh, you're all ready, Phyllis. And this is Eric, isn't it?

ERIC. Yes, ma'am.

PHYLLIS. We're just leaving, Mom.

ANGEL CHILD

MRS. CRAMER. Oh, are you? Well, have a nice time.

Have a nice time, children.

ERIC. We will. Goodbye. Goodbye, Amy — and thanks.

PHYLLIS. Don't wait up for me, Mom.

AMY. Hey, Mr. Williams! What time is it?

ERIC (*looks at his watch*). Two minutes to eight. Well, goodbye!

[*He and Phyllis exit.*]

MRS. CRAMER. Heavenly days, my feet! (*Sits on divan.*)

This is the first chance I've had to sit down tonight.

Eric is such a nice boy, isn't he?

AMY (*crossing to radio*). I guess so, but he's an awful dope. Just in time for Mr. Sinatra.

MRS. CRAMER (*vaguely*). Sinatra? Who's that?

AMY (*turns on the switch*). Who's *that*? Only your future son-in-law, that's all!

Quick Curtain

—

—

—

APPOMATTOX

By

GEORGE SEIBEL

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CAST

ANTONIO PAGLIACCI, *an organ-grinder*

THOMAS WILSON, *a police magistrate*

EDDIE SCRIPPS, *a reporter*

TIM CALLAHAN, *a plain-clothes man*

RED RILEY, *a policeman*

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES, *herself*

TIME. The present.

SCENE. A police court.

APPOMATTOX

Across the entire rear wall stretches a raised platform, with a railing in front and a high pulpit-like desk in the center. At both ends of the platform there are gates in the railing, with two steps to get back of it and upon the platform. About four feet in front of this railing is another, extending only as far as the gates and then turning almost at right angles; within these angles, at both sides, are benches. Near the center, a little to the right, is a low round stove, red with rust. Door leads to street at left; door leads to cells at right. The rear wall is decorated with a miscellaneous assortment of brewery calendars, "Police Gazette" pictures, posters announcing a Fireman's Ball, "Reward" bills, etc. On the desk are some dilapidated law books, some dockets, a pile of newspapers, ink-stand and pens, a box of cigars, a telephone, etc. Near the stove are two spittoons and an empty coal-scuttle.

Police Magistrate Thomas Wilson, a tall man of military bearing, gray hair and moustache, with his left sleeve empty, is sitting at the desk, making entries in the large docket. Eddie Scripps, reporter, with a straw hat and a prevailing air of chipper self-confidence, sits upon the railing at the left, with his feet upon the bench. Red Riley, a well-fed policeman, whose first name might apply either to his hair or his nose, is leaning over the railing at right, and aims occasional streams of tobacco-juice at the nearest spittoon.

RILEY. If you want to get a good story for the "Hornet," go an' hear them Peace Dames denouncin' the President as a war-monger.

SCRIPPS. I ain't no Sob Sister.

RILEY. It beats all. You newspaper guys — anything looks like work is some other fellow's job.

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SCRIPPS. That's how we keep fat and get rich.

RILEY. You reporters gotta snap — all the banquets you go to, and feed free, but if a policeman grabs a peanut from a dago you write half a page an' call 'im a grater.

WILSON (*rising and leaning over desk*). Hundred and twenty-two dollars this morning — and about forty cigars.

[*Holds out box toward Scripps.*]

SCRIPPS. I'll take this Henry Mud.

[*Scoops up three or four cigars.*]

RILEY. You got the making of a policeman in you.

SCRIPPS. Hundred and twenty-two bucks from drunks and disorderlies.

WILSON. Don't forget the Polish christening and the rooster fight.

SCRIPPS. Leave it to me. (*Slides down from his perch and prepares to go out.*) Gee, what's coming here?

[*Door left has opened; Mrs. Wentworth-Jones appears.*]

WILSON. Show the lady in, officer! (*To Scripps.*) I guess the servant girl has left without telling where she hocked the spoons.

[*Scripps lingers, sharpening a pencil.*]

RILEY. This way, ma'am. That's Judge Wilson there.

WILSON. Yes, madam, I am the magistrate.

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES. I think I wrote you a note.

WILSON. A note? What about?

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES. That's the way the police bureau is run. No attention was ever paid to it — thrown into the waste-basket, I presume.

WILSON. Madam, if you will tell me your name, and what the note was about, perhaps . . .

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES (*with a glance at Scripps*). So it will all be in the yellow papers? You know well enough what it was about? It was about that Italian organ-grinder who goes up Sylvania Avenue every morning.

WILSON. Oh!

APPOMATTOX

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES. Isn't there an ordinance forbidding organ-grinders the street?

WILSON. Why, yes . . .

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES. Then I'd like to know why the police do not enforce the law?

WILSON. We received your complaint . . .

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES. And that's all you did. Three mornings in succession the same Italian has passed down Sylvania Avenue, grinding out his tin-pan alley tunes until everyone is on the verge of nervous prostration. The nuisance is becoming intolerable.

WILSON. We took action . . .

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES. You're afraid you'll lose the Italian vote. Fifteen minutes ago he started down the street again. If these people are permitted to continue, why not confine them to poorer quarters, where the racket will not grate on refined ears?

SCRIPPS (*to Riley*). She wants Toscanini to bring his symphony orchestra down her way.

RILEY. Hell, she'd want fiddles with Angora cat-gut.

WILSON. Madam, if you would have given me time to speak, I would have explained to you. We received your complaint, and took action. A plain-clothes man was sent to watch for this Italian. It isn't often we get complaints; most people like the music.

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES. You ought to hear the tunes; he plays "Onward, Christian Soldiers," like a jitterbug.

SCRIPPS. It wouldn't hurt some of our Christian soldiers to step lively.

WILSON. The tunes make no difference to us. If there's a complaint, we enforce the law. The plain-clothes man has orders to arrest the Italian if he catches him.

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES. This is the last time I complain here; if the nuisance is not stopped . . . We pay heavy taxes and we demand protection . . . We . . .

CALLAHAN (*voice heard off left*). Now march right in, will yez? I've heard enough of yer palaverin'; in wid yez!

APPOMATTOX

TONIO (*voice heard off left*). Whata fora — I no doa notting — whata fora you arresta me?

WILSON. If I am not mistaken, madam, the desperate character you complain of has been arrested. Step aside, please, for a minute.

[She turns right. The door at left is opened violently, and officer Tim Callahan pushes through it an Italian organ-grinder, who clings tenaciously to his organ, which is suspended from his shoulder by straps and sustained by a sort of wooden stilt.]

CALLAHAN. On wid yez. On wid yez. On wid yez!

TONIO. I no doa notting. I no doa notting.

CALLAHAN. The devil — yez were playin' a tune 'at sounds like an Orangemen's parade.

WILSON. Bring him up here.

CALLAHAN. Come on. Come on!

[Drags Tonio to front of desk.]

WILSON (*to Mrs. Wentworth-Jones*). Will you prefer the charge?

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES (*reluctantly*). Must I appear in this?

WILSON. That's the way with you people; you growl and complain, but when it comes to standing by your guns, you haven't got the gumption. What's your name, Giuseppe? First be sworn.

TONIO. My name no Giuseppe. My name Tonio — Antonio Pagliacci. I no doa notting. He come and arresta me. I saya to him, I no doa notting.

WILSON. Shut up, will you? — and take the oath. You fellows are a damn nuisance, and I'm going to make an example of you. You were grinding your organ down Sylvania Avenue. Do you swear?

TONIO. I no swear. I belonga to de Holy Name.

CALLAHAN. I caught 'im, yer Honor. He's a damn nuisance.

TONIO. I no damn nuisance. I playa de nicea tune.

APPOMATTOX

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES. Atrocious! Perfectly atrocious! You should have heard it!

WILSON. Never mind what sort of a tune it was.

CALLAHAN. It were r-rotten!

WILSON. That'll do from you, too. Tonio, I'm going to soak you — just to make an example of you. We have had a number of complaints about you — from the richest and best people of the town.

[*Mrs. Wentworth-Jones swells with pride.*]

TONIO (*looks at her defiantly*). When I maka de poora little children glad, I no cara when de richa man getta mad.

WILSON. You don't care, don't you? Well, we do! Even a rich man still has some rights in America. That'll cost you ten dollars fine — and don't do it again.

TONIO (*dazed*). Tenna dollar — whata for?

SCRIPPS. That goes to buy some Standard Oil for the torch of Liberty enlightening the world.

TONIO. Tenna dollar — whata for? Dey tella me America de free countree; you soaka me tenna dollar for playa de nicea tune?

WILSON. Maybe you'd sooner go to the works for thirty days. Take your choice.

RILEY. That's the way to settle dem damn dagoes!

TONIO. Christoforo Colombo was a damma dago when he discover America so Irisha man getta job on police.

WILSON. Pay your fine and git!

TONIO (*puts his hand to his head in a dazed way*). I no understand. In de olda countree, in de Italy, Americana man giva me tenna dollar to playa de organ. Here he maka me paya de tenna dollar.

RILEY. Somebody gave ye ten over there, did they? That's good, Dago! Now shell out the same tenner.

CALLAHAN. Was it old man Rockefeller gave yez the tin?

SCRIPPS. A dime! To stop playing?

TONIO. I no knowa hisa name. Drunken sailor man in

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street — one time in Napoli — I playa “Homa, sweeta Home.” He cry — cry like little baby. Then he coma up anda giva me tenna dollar gold.

RILEY. The man *was* drunk, sure.

SCRIPPS. I thought maybe you had gotten the ten from some crowned head. Ever play for the king of Italy — or the Pope?

TONIO (*draws himself up proudly*). When I wasa de littla *ragazzo*, I play for de great general in de whole world — the great general no say Tonio damn nuisance.

WILSON. You better plank down your fine and get out.

SCRIPPS. Let’s hear about the general, Dago. Was it old Garibaldi?

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES. I’ll go, your Honor. I’m glad the police are so efficient, but sorry to hear they are so much addicted to profanity.

WILSON. It oils the machinery of justice, madam. We have to swear to make the rascals respect us.

[*She gathers up her skirts, and sweeps in a parabolic curve around the spittoon and past Tonio, who tries to follow her.*]

TONIO. I no doa notting. Whatta fora maka me paya de tenna dollar? Italiano man poor — no gotta de mon — no doa notting.

MRS. WENTWORTH-JONES. And this is the nation that writes our grand operas that cost us seven dollars a seat!
[*Exits.*]

WILSON. Come, pay your fine and git!

[*Makes entries in docket.*]

SCRIPPS. Let’s hear about the general, Dago?

TONIO. De gran’ general no say me damn nuisance.

[*Puts his organ gently on top of the stove.*]

SCRIPPS. Tell us all about it, and I’ll give you a free write-up in the “Hornet,” and run in a half-tone picture of your monkey.

TONIO. I liva in de New Yorka, many years ago — littla *ragazzo*, lika dat. Ona day I playa on de corner of

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bigga street — playa two time, den go away. Den young woman coma outa bigga house, runna after Tonio, giva me de halava dollar. "Playa some mora," she says. "Play de 'Star Spangle Banna.' Sicka man he wanta hear." She pointa up at window uppa-stairs. I playa some mora — "Star Spangle Banna" anda Verdi "Miserere" (*He hums the tune.*) then Tonio go away. Nexa day I coma some mora.

RILEY. Yez rimimbered the half-dollar.

WILSON (*looks up*). Don't forget the ten.

TONIO. I playa de "Star Spangle Banna" anda Donizetti marcha "Belisario" (*Humms the tune.*) anda girila coma some mora anda say, "Coma playa evera day. General verra sicka."

SCRIPPS. Did she give you another half buck?

TONIO. I coma nexa day, an' nexa day, an' nexa day. I coma evera day to bigga fina house. I playa "Star Spangle Banna," "Belisario," "Trovatore" — evera day. Nexa week — maybe two week — girl coma down an' say, "General wanta come uppa."

SCRIPPS. Plot thickens; badger game!

TONIO. Me go uppa. Fina house — nicea lounge — picture on wall — statua — many sworda, many sworda! Me go uppa fronta room — see de general. Him sitta in de bigga chair — pillow holda him uppa — blanket arounda de leg. (*Wilson looks up, becoming interested.*) General, he say to me: "I lika you play. I lika hear de 'Star Spangle Banna.' Maka me thinka 'bout Appomatto."

WILSON. What's that? (*Leans forward.*) What's that?

TONIO. Appomatto. Appomatto! Den general say, "What de odder tune — sad, slow, stronga tune?" "Belisario," I say to general. General, he say to me, "Play him." I play "Belisario" — you know "Belisario"?

CALLAHAN. He don't peddle bananas on my bate.

TONIO. Oh, "Belisario" — datta "Belisario."

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[*He reaches for the crank of his organ, on the stove, and plays the march from Donizetti's opera "Belisario," a composition in which frustrated ambition, desolate glory, and solemn sorrow are sublimely mingled.*]

RILEY. That's a domn fine tune, all right.

SCRIPPS. What the general say?

TONIO. I tella de general abouta de opera in Milano — how olda general longa time ago winna many battle — winna alla world — den king putta out his eyes, and he have to begga bread in street — blinda, he starve. (*Wilson is very much interested.*) Den general say to me, "Yes, poora Belisari, poora Belisari! Dey do sama way now — putta out eyes, maka begga in street." I no understanda. Den general say to me, "You playa evera day," he say. "Evera day till I dead. I die soon, verra soon. You play evera day — playa 'Belisari' anda 'Star Spangle Banna.' Datta maka me thinka 'bout Appomatto."

WILSON (*leans forward*). What's that?

TONIO. Ap-po-mat-to! Afterwhila some mora day, maybe two weeka, girl coma down to corner some mora. (*All are now listening intently to the Italian's story.*) She saya to me, "Dey taka de general away tomorra. He senda you thissa — no gotta de mon." She give me medaglia, golden medaglia, with face of general on medaglia. Nexa morning dey taka general away in bigga carriage. Dey calla him, "Il grando general." When carriage go away, I play "Belisario." He looka from window, looka at Tonio. I play "Belisario" an' cry lika littla baby. Bigga carriage go away, an' Tonio looka at picture on medaglia.

[*He fumbles a medal suspended from his neck by a string.*]

WILSON. What's his name?

TONIO. After some mora day I hear de general he die. I never forget. I go away from de New Yorka — coma here to playa de organ — make de littla children dance

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an' sing. De littla children no thinka Tonio damn dago. Il grando general no thinka de organ damn nuisance. Il General Belisario!

[He again fumbles the medal suspended from his neck, while plunging the other hand into his pocket, which is filled with small change.]

WILSON. Let's see that medal, Tonio; let's see it?

TONIO. Tenna dollar fina! Me no doa notting. Tenna dollar?

[Brings out coins.]

WILSON. Let me see that medal!

[Tonio hands it to him.]

SCRIPPS. Is it a long-lost uncle?

WILSON *(looks long at the medal)*. I have seen that face before. I know it well. I have seen it black with the smoke of battle, bright with the joy of victory. I have seen it at Donelson, at bloody Shiloh, in the Wilderness, at Appomattox, in weary days before Richmond. It is a face I never will forget. *(His voice breaks.)* The man that saved the Union!

TONIO *(counting coins)*. Tenna dollar — no doa notting — den dey tell Italiano man America de free countree. Tenna dollar!

WILSON *(pushing back coins)*. Never mind! Fine is remitted. Remitted — *no need pay*. Take your medal and go back and play in Sylvania Avenue.

[Hands medal back to Tonio.]

TONIO. Whatta you say?

CALLAHAN. War is diclared agin!

WILSON. I told you to go back and play in Sylvania Avenue.

TONIO *(gathers up coins)*. No needa pay?

WILSON. No, get out.

SCRIPPS. Give him a pension, why don't you?

WILSON. Many draw pensions for less.

RILEY. If he goes back and plays in Sylvania Avenue, that

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there Mrs. Von Highton will be around raisin' Halle-lujah.

[Tonio packs up his organ.]

WILSON. Officer Riley, you tell that woman this man has special permission to play wherever he damn pleases.

[Tonio moves toward door.]

RILEY (*puzzled*). By whose order, if she axes?

WILSON (*rises very erect, and carries his hand to his cap*).

Tell her — tell her it is by order of General Grant!

[Tonio grinds out "Star Spangled Banner," while Wilson stands at attention.]

Curtain

STRANGER IN THE NIGHT
By
RACHEL REYNOLDS & PHOEBE SMITH

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CAST

MADAME TERRON

JEAN, *her grandson*

MAN

DOCTOR

TWO GENDARMES

OFFICER

TIME. November, 1920.

PLACE. France.

STRANGER IN THE NIGHT

Madame Terron lives in a small cottage by the railroad track with her grandson, Jean. She is a "garde barrière." It is her duty to lower the barrier against traffic and pedestrians when notified by telephone of an approaching train. Trains come and go with regularity; the only break in the dull routine is caused by fog or flood. The cottage is sparsely furnished: a round table covered by a checkered cloth; a couch that serves as a bed, drawn near the stove for warmth; the stove, French style, away from the wall, downstage left. Backstage right, is the door to the outside. A dresser, a small window, shuttered on the outside, center. On the wall downstage right is the telephone, and below it the entrance to Jean's bedroom. A lamp, a shrine, and a few chairs complete the furnishings.

It is in the early hours of a cold November morning. Madame Terron sits on the side of her bed facing the stove, clad in an ample nightgown, a little black shawl over her head, carpet slippers on her feet, yawning and shivering. She reaches for a voluminous black skirt lying across the foot of the bed and struggles into it, fighting her yawns as she does so. Then she moves a coffee-pot forward from the back of the stove, to heat the coffee, and stands warming her hands, when the telephone rings. She looks at it with an unfriendly eye.

MME. T. You! And what might you want at this time in the morning? (*She puts the coffee-pot on the stove and hurries to answer another ring.*) Oh, take hold of yourself! Give a woman time. Allo? Allo? No, no, no, do I sound like a sergeant of police? What? This is the house of the level-crossing guard at Le Roussey. Get the guard? I am the guard. *The railway guard!*

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Eh? No man in the house? But naturally there is a man in the house, — my grandson. Eh? No, no, no. Take hold of yourself and listen to me. My grandson is now . . . allo? . . . allo? . . . (*She drops the receiver in disgust.*) What an invention!

[*She comes back to the foot of her bed, gets from it a woollen jacket and shrugs herself into it; then reaches two cups down from the dresser shelf, putting them on the table, and comes close to the stove to warm herself. Soon she turns her head to listen to a sound she alone can hear, and almost at once someone knocks on the door, and she goes to open it to her grandson, Jean Terron. He is young, about nineteen. He comes in, muffled against the cold, carrying a lighted lantern, which he turns down and stands on the floor while she shuts and bars the door.*

JEAN. Brrr! What a night. (*He comes down to the stove to warm himself.*) You can eat it. It is like the weather Antoine-Marie writes about from Canada. When the train went through, her headlights were no more than a candle-flame in the fog; the rest of her I could not see. And before she finished shaking the ground, her tail-light was a pin-prick and then (*He snaps his fingers.*) it was out!

MME. T. They may like such things in Canada. For me, no thank you!

JEAN (*amused*). You've been here winters enough to be used to the weather, Granny.

MME. T. (*tartly*). But never shall I accustom myself to being called a sergeant of police by that invention on the wall there.

JEAN. Sergeant of police? (*He laughs.*) Wrong number again?

MME. T. (*disgusted*). *Wrong number.* And if I am told that a train is due in ten minutes and I look at the wrong number on the clock and I go to the barrier to find that one of those racing motorists, who think the good God made roads for them alone, has run into the train be-

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cause I am not there in time to drop the barrier, how long shall I keep my job? Tell me that. But girls in the telephone can get away with murder. (*She sits on the end of her bed, rubbing her knees.*) Is that coffee hot?

JEAN (*feeling it*). Yes. I'll pour you a cup, Granny. (*He fetches cups from table and fills one.*) But Lise is nice.

MME. T. Ay, it all comes back to that. If I am called the public executioner by the telephone, what matter? Lise is nice. (*She takes the cup he offers her and sips while he fills the other cup.*) Is Lise on night-duty now?

JEAN (*laughing*). I'm afraid she is, Granny.

MME. T. What did I tell you?

JEAN (*sitting beside her*). What you should do is let me take the night work, while you stay warm in bed.

MME. T. Ha! And the next thing would be: "Madame Terron, you are too old for your job. We have given it to your grandson." A nice thing!

JEAN. Grand. It would keep the job in the family.

[*She gives him a rough caress in the form of a push.*]

MME. T. Ah — bad boy! Drink up your coffee and go to bed.

JEAN. It's hot . . . I wonder who wanted the sergeant of police.

MME. T. The President of the Telephone Company. And do you know what for? To arrest Lise, for giving so many wrong numbers.

[*This amuses her so much that she laughs aloud, bringing down one hand and her cup on her knees with enjoyment. Jean laughs with her, humoring her, then speaks hesitatingly.*]

JEAN. Granny, you — you *like* Lise, don't you?

MME. T. Like . . . ? Put the cups on the dresser and go to bed. Is this the hour for talking marriage-settlements?

JEAN. No, but Granny . . .

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[A knock at the shuttered window and a dim cry outside silence them.]

MAN. Let me in!

MME. T. *(crossing herself)*. Merciful saints, who can it be at this hour?

JEAN *(jumping up)*. The police! That call! Someone they're wanting.

MME. T. Then let him stay outside.

[Frantic knocking on the shutter.]

MAN. Let me in! For the love of heaven, let me in!

[Jean moves. Mme. Terron catches his arm.]

MME. T. Let him stay. Mixing up with police business never did anyone any good. If we're quiet, he'll think the house is empty, and go.

[They are silent. The knocking stops. Then in a minute it is renewed, this time on the door.]

MAN. Let me in! Oh, let me in! I am dying of cold!

JEAN *(freeing himself)*. That fog would freeze the heart of a railway tie.

[He goes toward the door, stopping to lift and turn up the lantern.]

MME. T. Ah! The fog — I had forgotten it, heaven forgive me. *(She rises and turns up the lamp.)* Give me the lantern while you unbar the door.

MAN *(hammering wildly)*. Let me in! Quickly. Quickly!

MME. T. We are coming.

JEAN. One minute!

[She holds the lantern. Jean unbars the door. Framed in the doorway is a Man, wet, shivering, clad only in pajamas and slippers.]

MME. T. *(startled)*. Heaven protect us!

[Jean, also startled, moves as though to bar the Man's entrance, but the Man puts him aside and comes in with a certain dignity in spite of his attire, of which he seems quite unaware.]

MAN. How dare you keep me waiting so long? Close the door!

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JEAN (*still holding it open*). But I think you've made a mistake, sir, we . . .

MAN. Close that door at once! How dare you dispute an order?

[*He looks so stern that Jean obeys slowly.*]

MME. T. But who are you? Coming from nowhere out of the night . . .

MAN (*stopping her with a lifted hand*). My good woman, I am the President of France. (*They stare at him blankly. He comes farther down the room.*) I am the President of France and I demand shelter. Shelter — yes, and warmth. Out in the cold so long. I am freezing. (*He moves down to the stove. Behind him, Mme. Terron and Jean glance at each other and follow him.*) Warmth — yes, that is what I need — warmth. (*He puts one hand to his head.*) There was something else . . . but warmth certainly is one thing — ah . . .

[*He gives a long sigh, sways, and Jean hurries to his support.*]

MME. T. Here! Quick, Jean! My bed.

MAN. Bed — yes, I should like to go to bed. (*Jean helps him sit on the side of the bed by the stove.*) Have I been ill?

JEAN. I don't know, sir.

[*Mme. Terron, behind the bed, is rummaging inside it.*]

MME. T. Ill? Of course he's been ill. Anyone can see that. (*She produces an object wrapped in flannel.*) Here's my hot brick. Put it under his feet; they're blue with cold. And take those wet slippers off. (*Jean obeys, while she fetches a shawl from the dresser drawer and puts it round the Man's shoulders, talking all the while.*) Enough to kill anyone, night like this, with the fog like a shroud. Throw wood on the stove, Jean. And is there coffee in the pot?

JEAN. Plenty.

MME. T. Hot coffee will put life into him. Eh, sir? Not so? Feeling a little warmer?

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[*But the Man is motionless, his blank eyes looking straight ahead. Mme. Terron and Jean draw away from him and stand together regarding him intently.*]

JEAN. Who can he be? He's not from our part of the country. Never before have I seen him.

MME. T. A visitor, perhaps, at one of the big houses. Walking . . .

JEAN. Walking in his sleep, you mean?

MME. T. How else could he come here? He is a rich man. One can tell it by his manner.

JEAN. The telephone call! If I speak to Lise at the exchange, she might know if someone has been missed. She might have heard.

MME. T. That is a thought. (*Jean turns to the phone.*) Stop! One minute. He is speaking. Listen!

[*The Man is muttering indistinguishable words. Jean goes toward him, still watching him intently.*]

MAN. No. No. It is not so, I say. (*More clearly.*) Pictures! The Exhibition! An excuse. Would they have made a change in their ambassador — and such a change! — unless they feared a crisis? (*He looks up, sees Jean, speaks clearly, commandingly.*) Boy! where is my secretary? Fetch him. (*Jean watches him without moving.*) Do you hear me?

JEAN. Yes, sir.

MAN. Then don't stand there staring at me. Go at once!

JEAN. Certainly, sir. (*He goes back to his Grand-mother.*) What are we to do with him?

[*The Man's mind is wandering again. He rises.*]

MAN. I must not be late for this reception. Take my cloak, Charles. (*He throws off the shawl as he would an evening cloak, straightens himself and bows with ceremony to an imaginary person.*) Your Excellency, I cordially welcome you to our exhibition and compliment you profoundly on the magnificent contribution that your country has made toward its success. In the Pavilion

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of Art . . . (*His voice dies away; he stumbles back to the bed.*) Oh, I am so tired, so tired . . . (*He lifts his head, sees vaguely that there are people in the room, and waves them away.*) Send those reporters away. I'll not see them. I'll not see them, I say. The press! They respect nothing. Not even . . . (*His gaze becomes focussed on Mme. Terron.*) And who is that woman? What is she doing here? (*He thumps the bed angrily with his fist.*) Is my office to be cluttered up with all the riff-raff of Paris? I cannot and will not see her. Send her away.

MME. T. (*with the courage of pity*). Yes, yes, sir. I'm leaving at once. I only came to get you a cup of coffee. [*She hurries up to the dresser for a cup, comes down left of the bed and pours the coffee. The Man sits slumped over. Above his head she points to the telephone, but as Jean goes to it, the Man jumps up.*]

MAN. Touch that telephone and I kill you!

JEAN. I only want to speak to my girl.

MAN. *Your girl!* You expect me to believe that story? Am I mad? Do you think me insane?

JEAN. Oh, no, sir, but . . .

MAN. Then don't go near that phone! (*Jean comes away from it unwillingly. The Man crosses to him.*) I will tell you what you are. (*He lifts a threatening finger.*) You are a reporter. A pest! A wasp! And the girl you would ring up is the office of your wretched rag of a newspaper. It is nothing to you if you destroy a man's reputation — the safety of the world — so long as you get a story. (*He grips Jean by the shoulders and shakes him. Mme. Terron puts down the cup in fright.*) One word from you over that telephone and you will write a story about yourself, my friend!

[*Mme. Terron crosses quickly.*]

MME. T. Don't! Don't hurt him! He means no harm! He is my grandson, and no reporter, and he never did harm to a living soul. Let him go!

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[She hangs on to the Man, and he releases Jean slowly and steps back to look at both of them.]

MAN. Your grandson, you say? But what I say is, what are you and your grandson doing in my room? Has the President of France no rights?

MME. T. We — I — I was bringing you your coffee, sir.

MAN. Coffee?

MME. T. *(hurrying back to the stove)*. Yes, I have it all ready poured out.

[She brings it to him quickly. He takes it, tastes it.]

MAN. This brew? You call it coffee? Why, you she-devil, it is poisoned! *(He dashes the cup to the ground.)* Traitors! Traitors, everywhere! *(He swings around and strides to the door, which he tries to open without unbarring it. He bangs on it.)* Open! Open! Would you keep me prisoner? Open, I say!

[Pointing a finger at telephone, Mme. Terron hurries to keep the Man pacified. Jean grabs the phone.]

MME. T. I'm coming, sir. I'll open it for you. The bar was dropped in error.

[She lifts the bar and opens the door. The Man takes a step out, feels the cold and hesitates; stops.]

JEAN *(quickly, and quietly, into the phone)*. Lise! This is Jean. Lise, quick! Don't connect me. Put in a call to the police yourself. There's a dangerous madman here with Granny and me. Quick!

[He hangs up and moves away, as the Man comes back into the room slowly. He looks dazed.]

MAN. It is cold out there. Shut the door. *(Mme. Terron does so. The Man looks in a puzzled way at his pajama sleeve, then down at the rest of the suit, aware for the first time of what he is wearing.)* My clothes — where are my clothes? *(He lifts his head and sees Jean.)* You! Why are there no more lights? I can't see you. Are you Charles?

[Mme. Terron, behind the Man, nods vigorously, and Jean takes his cue.]

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JEAN. Yes, sir.

MAN. Then where are my clothes? You know I have this reception to attend, and there are no clothes laid out. I have been ringing and ringing. I cannot understand what has come over you, Charles. Your service is disgraceful.

JEAN. I'm very sorry, sir.

MAN. Then see to it that I have no further cause for complaint. Would you have me keep the Emperor waiting?

JEAN. No, sir.

MAN. Then lay out my clothes, with all my Orders and Medals. And prepare my bath. At once!

JEAN. Yes, sir.

[The Man waves him away and wanders down a little farther. He sees the cup on the floor and stops dead, pointing an indignant finger at it.]

MAN. That cup! What is it doing there? Do I live in a tenement — a slum — that cups are thrown on the floor? *(Mme. Terron passes Jean, and picks up the offending cup, putting it on the table. The Man sits on the foot of the bed, watching her. Then he speaks quietly, in a friendly tone.)* Come. Come to me. Let me look at you.

[Mme. Terron comes to face him. He suddenly smiles at her and puts his hands on her shoulders affectionately.]

MAN. Why, it is Blaisine, my old nurse! How did you know where to find me?

MME. T. *(humouring him)*. Ah, there's little I don't know.

MAN *(with a little laugh)*. The same as ever! You always knew where to find me.

MME. T. And a bad one you were, hiding yourself at bedtime.

MAN *(resting his head against her)*. Oh, Blaisine, I am so tired.

MME. T. Of course you're tired. Come now, into bed with you. *(He releases her slowly and rises, staggering with weariness. Jean moves down between table and bed,*

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in case she has trouble with him, but he sinks down thankfully at the head of the bed, and lets Mme. Terron remove his slippers and rub his feet between her hands.) Cold as frogs! Into bed, and let me tuck you up.

[Mme. Terron turns back the covers invitingly, but he lays a hand on her arm.]

MAN. There was something I have forgotten, Blaisine.

A — a reception, I think.

MME. T. Never you mind about a reception. I'll call you in time for that, never fear.

MAN. You will? Thank you, Blaisine.

[He drops on the pillow, exhausted. Mme. Terron lifts his legs inside the covers and tucks him up.]

MME. T. *(soothingly)*. Now sleep, my poor little tired one.

MAN. Yes . . . Don't leave me, Blaisine. Give me your hand. *(She sits beside him and takes the hand he offers, rubbing it gently. The telephone rings. He stirs fretfully.)* Oh, can I never have one moment's peace? *(Jean goes to the phone.)* Is that the Ambassador, tell him . . . my profound apologies . . .

[His voice trails off.]

MME. T. Yes, yes, it shall be done. S'sh — s'sh — sleep. *(At phone, quietly.)* Allo? Lise? Did you . . . ?

[He listens.]

MAN *(drowsily)*. You — you won't forget to wake me in good time . . .

MME. T. I shall not forget.

MAN *(with a long sigh)*. So tired — so glad to be in bed — get some peace at last — peace —

[Mme. Terron turns her head to listen, as Jean speaks quietly.]

JEAN. Good. How can I say how long he will be quiet? He threatened to kill me. Eh? Of course I am safe, or how could I be talking to you?

MME. T. *(in loud whisper)*. Did she tell them to bring clothes for him?

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[Jean motions her to be quiet.]

JEAN. Oh? Not coming here? Searching? Oh!
(*Quickly.*) Well, thank you, Lise. Good night, my little cabbage. See you later.

MME. T. P'sst! Have done with that and tell me what she says. And you said nothing about clothes.

[Jean, still listening at the phone, laughs softly.]

JEAN. Good night.

[He hangs up. Mme. Terron disengages her hand gently, draws the covers round the Man, and rises.]

MME. T. (*going to Jean*). Well?

JEAN. (*quietly*). The police are out, searching for him. The line was tied up with a trunk call. Lise couldn't get through at once. When she did they said the matter had been reported and cars were out searching.

MME. T. They know who he is?

JEAN. If they do, they didn't tell her.

MME. T. But searching in this fog! If he were not here, he might be lying on the road for them to run over him! What would they do then?

JEAN (*shrugging*). Who knows? Lise told them he was here, so they may send another car to search for the first one.

[They move, turn, stand looking at the sleeping man.]

MME. T. A trunk-call, eh? Would it be about him, do you think? I wonder who he is. He speaks well.

JEAN. He can be a Hollywood film-star for all I care, so long as he keeps quiet until someone comes for him.

MME. T. That is a thought, Jean. Would he be that, do you think? A Hollywood one? They are not all young.

JEAN. Maybe. On his way from the Riviera to Paris for some fun.

MME. T. By the express? But how did he get out? There is no station for miles.

JEAN. There is the water-halt.

MME. T. Ah! And he leaped from the window!

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JEAN (*shrugging*). Why not? They are all mad, those people.

MME. T. (*nodding emphatically*). It is their money that does it. Money should come only to good thrifty people who know what to do with it.

[*Jean turns away, yawning.*]

JEAN. I know what I could do with some sleep.

[*He sits by the table, his head on his folded arms.*]

MME. T. (*decidedly*). No! No sleep for you before the police come. (*She gets the coffee-pot from the stove, takes it past the bed to the table, and pours.*) There, drink that and keep awake.

[*She pours a cup for herself; sits left of table.*]

JEAN. If the police are searching the roads, maybe they won't come here. There are other ways to go.

MME. T. (*slowly*). That is true, and then in fog they might pass us by. (*She sips her coffee. Then a bright thought comes.*) I have it! Go out and drop the barrier! That will bring them, never fear. They will come, if only to arrest us for blocking the road when there is no train.

JEAN (*grumbling*). Who wants to be arrested?

MME. T. Ah! Sleepy-head! They won't arrest us when they see him. (*She jerks a thumb toward the bed.*) They will give us a medal, maybe.

JEAN (*sarcastically*). Maybe. (*He struggles to his feet, yawning.*) All the same, you are right, Granny. That is the best way to bring them.

MME. T. (*briskly*). Naturally I am right. When was I ever wrong? Away with you, and I will keep your coffee hot. (*She checks his movement with a gesture.*) Did you hear . . . ? (*They listen. She shakes her head impatiently.*) This fog! It smothers every sound like a blanket.

JEAN. No! There is something.

[*He seizes the lantern and opens the door. A man's voice is heard off.*]

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VOICE (*the words inaudible*). This should be the place.

Mind your step, Doctor. (*Calling, as he sees Jean.*)

Hi! Railway-guard of Le Roussey?

JEAN (*going out, calling*). That's right. Who are you?

VOICE. Police.

JEAN. This way.

[*All this sound is dim, confused in the fog. Mme. Terron comes down to see that the Man is still asleep, then goes to the door, which she pulls to, shivering, until Jean opens it to admit an Officer of gendarmes and a man in plain clothes with a doctor's bag.*]

OFFICER. Madame Terron?

MME. T. Yes, sir.

OFFICER. You have a strange man here. Where is he?

MME. T. (*pouring the story out*). In my bed and fast asleep now, thank heaven. (*Both men make for the bed, and she follows them, talking rapidly.*) Came and banged on the shutters, he did, and then on the door, and in nothing but his night-clothes. And raving about Presidents and Emperors and receptions, — as mad as they make them, poor soul. And said he'd kill my grandson if he so much as touched the telephone. I can assure you, sir . . .

OFFICER. Yes, yes. Not now. (*Both men bend over the bed, the Doctor feeling for the Man's pulse. Pause. The Officer speaks quietly.*) Not a doubt of it, Doctor.

DOCTOR. Beyond question it is . . . (*He straightens himself, finishes his sentence cautiously.*) . . . the man we are looking for. And he'd better be moved out of here as quickly as possible. Get those fellows in with the stretcher, will you?

[*The Officer goes to the door and out, and the Doctor comes round the foot of the bed, Mme. Terron making way for him.*]

OFFICER (*calling off*). All right, you men.

DOCTOR. Has he had anything to eat or drink, Madame Terron?

STRANGER IN THE NIGHT

MME. T. I offered him coffee, but he dashed it down and said it was poisoned. As if I would poison anyone, even a madman! And a wild one he must be if he's to be strapped down on a stretcher! Merciful saints, we might have been murdered!

DOCTOR. Oh, no. He is quite harmless. An illness has affected the memory for a little while — that is all.

JEAN. But who is he, sir?

[But the Doctor is spared an answer, for the Officer is now back, followed by two gendarmes with a stretcher and blankets. The Officer shuts the door.]

DOCTOR. Good. Set it there on a line with the door. *(They follow instructions, Mme. Terron and Jean drawing back into the right front corner, watching.)* Hold that blanket to the stove. *(One man does so, unrolling the blanket and holding it wide to warm it. Behind him, the movements of the Doctor and the other man are sometimes visible and sometimes not, as they carefully uncover the sleeping Man.)* Now, that blanket!

[The Man is moved carefully, the blanket slid under him and rolled around him, and the two gendarmes lift him on to the stretcher, feet toward the door; tuck the other blankets around him — the Doctor standing near to supervise; fasten the straps, and lift the stretcher with care. The Officer opens the door, flicks on an electric torch. Mme. Terron moves quickly.]

MME. T. But is he dead, that he sleeps like that?

DOCTOR. No, no. All right, you men! Carry him carefully. *(The men go out with their burden, the Officer going first.)* He is in the sleep of exhaustion, Madame. Good night. Will you bring the lantern, boy?

[He hastens out.]

MME. T. *(following them to the door.)* But who is he? Will no one tell me who he is?

JEAN *(picking up the lantern.)* I'll find out.

[He hurries off. Mme. Terron shuts the door irritably, comes down to her bed, and pushes and thumps the pillows]

STRANGER IN THE NIGHT

and mattress, and rearranges the covers, grumbling to herself.

MME. T. In and out like a dog at the fair! Is my house the highroad? Or do they think I wish to live at the North Pole? Bah! I've no patience — police and their secrets! (*She thumps the pillow back into place, turning as the door opens again.*) Well, did you discover their wonderful secret? Was he the Emperor of Japan, or the Mayor of Paris, by any chance?

OFFICER. Madame Terron. (*She wheels around. Jean follows the Officer in, and comes down on his left to hear the news. The Officer moves forward a few steps.*) Madame Terron, you have had the honor of sheltering the President of France.

MME. T. (*throwing up her hands and dropping them*). The President? He spoke truly?

OFFICER. Yes. He was on the Riviera-Paris express. It is supposed he left the train when they stopped for water farther up the line.

JEAN. I said he got off at the water-halt!

MME. T. That's true. My grandson said those very words. It was heaven's mercy that he wandered here, or he might well be dead in a ditch!

OFFICER. As you say, Madame. You are to be commended highly for your care. You and your grandson.

MME. T. We are simple folk, sir. We did what we could.

OFFICER. And there is one thing more you do. Be discreet. Not a word, if you please. You will understand the effect of this on France — on the world — if this is in every newspaper. France requires you, Madame (*To Jean.*) and you, my friend, to be discreet. A still tongue! You understand me?

MME. T. Naturally, sir. There will not be a word said.

JEAN. Not a word, sir.

OFFICER. Good. Good day to you. (*Glancing at his wrist-watch.*) Nearly four o'clock!

STRANGER IN THE NIGHT

[*He gives a little bow to Mme. Terron, a pleasant nod to Jean, and goes.*]

MME. T. Good day, sir.

[*Jean closes and bars the door behind him. He comes down the room slowly, comes to a stop.*]

JEAN. President of France . . .

MME. T. And he dashed my coffee on the floor and lay in my bed! Eh, Jean my boy, what a tale to tell your children in the years to come!

JEAN. Years to come? I shall tell my Lise tomorrow. No — today!

[*He makes for the telephone.*]

MME. T. Stop! What did the officer say? Be discreet! And the door was not closed upon him when you break your word.

JEAN. *Not tell Lise?* Is Lise one to let me keep a secret like that?

MME. T. If Lise knows, it will be up and down the line like a thunderbolt. Every railway-guard and signalman will know it from here to the world's end. Is that discretion, I ask you?

JEAN. It is a *secret*. She will tell no one.

MME. T. And the telephone? You think no one will be listening in?

JEAN. Who in Le Roussey will be awake now?

MME. T. Who spoke of Le Roussey? But it is well known that the police and the newspapers listen to *all* conversations, even the most private.

JEAN. That's true. I had forgotten.

MME. T. Ah! But I had not. I think. I remember. Also I am railway-guard at Le Roussey and not you, my little grandson. (*She sits on the end of her bed.*) No. Tomorrow I shall go to the postoffice and tell it, in secret, to Madame Dergeret, who has told me in secret many interesting little bits that have come by post-card or telegraph to the big houses. And Lucien Bonnicar,

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my old friend, must know it; politics are his life. And Mathilde Pichon . . .

JEAN. What? You expect Mathilde Pichon to keep a secret? She tells everything to Father Bidot while he eats his meals.

MME. T. It will go no farther.

JEAN. It will go no farther than Father Bidot can travel, maybe.

MME. T. Do you accuse the good Father of being a gossip, irreligious boy?

JEAN. Is there a story from here to Paris that does not start in his house? I ask you that! And my marriage with Lise is to be torn to shreds before my eyes because Mathilde Pichon and the postmistress must know the story first!

MME. T. (*angrily*). Am I the guard of Le Roussey, or are you?

JEAN (*grimly*). The 6.45 up and the 7.12 down will pass before long, and who will stand in the fog and the cold and drop the barrier and guard the road? I shall.

[*He taps himself on the chest with finality. Mme. Teron surveys him out of the corners of her eyes. She edges closer to the stove and rubs her knees. Then she speaks mildly.*]

MME. T. It is true I am old and useless, and it is time you had a fine young wife. Tell her the story. But swear her to secrecy.

JEAN. Lise can keep a secret as well as anyone.

MME. T. Without doubt. All I ask — and it is not much — is that you tell her face to face.

JEAN. But I can't see her till this afternoon!

MME. T. Naturally she must sleep after her night's work. But that is not long to wait, Jean, and I will do my marketing very quickly and release you to wait on her doorstep for the instant she wakes.

JEAN. And by that time the birds in the air will know the

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story, and Lise will be mad because I have not told her.

MME. T. (*dramatically*). Then go! Go to her now!

And when you are old, may you have a better grandson!

JEAN. Now, Granny . . . (*The phone rings. They both look at it.*) There she is. And now what do I say?

MME. T. (*rising*). I will do the talking. (*She takes down the receiver, smiling into it politely.*) Allo? What? No, it is *not*! (*She bangs the receiver down and points dramatically at the phone.*) The wrong number! At this time of night, the wrong number! And that — *that* — is the girl to whom you would tell a secret!

Curtain

“WHO PICKED MRS. FLOWER?”

By

DOROTHY NICHOLS & DOROTHY WYMAN

*“Who Picked Mrs. Flower?”, a play about home nursing,
was first produced by the Palo Alto Community Players, at
Palo Alto, Calif.*

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CAST

MRS. PARSONS

MRS. FLOWER

MRS. SANDERSON

TIME. The present.

PLACE. The home town.

"WHO PICKED MRS. FLOWER?"

Mrs. Flower comes in with a small bouquet. She approaches the bed, sees that Mrs. Parsons is asleep, takes off her hat and coat, tiptoes about. She finds a vase, and puts the flowers in it, then decides to put the flowers where the patient will see them, and moves the table; bumps the bed. The patient opens her eyes.

MRS. FLOWER. Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. Parsons, did I wake you up?

MRS. PARSONS (*surprised*). Oh! Is that you, Mrs. Flower?

MRS. FLOWER. Yes, I just came in to see how you are, Mrs. Parsons.

MRS. PARSONS. Where's Julia?

MRS. FLOWER. Your daughter had to go to work this afternoon, Mrs. Parsons. She was worried about leaving you alone, and so I said I'd come over and look after you. I told her just to run along and not worry a bit.

MRS. PARSONS. That's very nice of you, I'm sure. That's very kind.

MRS. FLOWER. Well, I didn't know you'd been sick so long, Mrs. Parsons. You've surely had a siege of it.

MRS. PARSONS. Yes, it's been quite a while for me. But I'm much better.

MRS. FLOWER. That's fine. You look just fine.

MRS. PARSONS. I'm just weak yet.

MRS. FLOWER. I don't think it's good for a person to stay a long time in bed. I hope you don't lose the use of your legs or anything.

MRS. PARSONS. Oh, no, I don't think so. I always was a hard worker, but the flu does get you down.

MRS. FLOWER. Well, I hope you'll be up soon.

“WHO PICKED MRS. FLOWER?”

MRS. PARSONS. Yes, the doctor says I can get up just as soon as my temperature stays down. I just have to stay quiet and stay covered up.

MRS. FLOWER. Yes, that's right.

MRS. PARSONS. Julia said I was almost normal this morning, when she took it.

MRS. FLOWER. Well, maybe you'd like to sit up for a while. I can help you into a chair.

MRS. PARSONS (*apologetically*). I feel a little feverish this afternoon.

MRS. FLOWER (*feels her cheek and forehead*). It's the back of the hand, they always tell you. I can always feel if a person has a fever. You certainly do feel as if you had some, Mrs. Parsons.

MRS. PARSONS. The thermometer's on the table.

MRS. FLOWER. Do you want me to take it? Well, maybe I should.

[*She tries to shake it down with long sweeps.*]

MRS. PARSONS. Julia shook it down.

MRS. FLOWER (*looking at it*). Yes, so she did. I always like to hold them away from me when I shake them; they're so breakable, if you hit a button or anything — and so expensive.

MRS. PARSONS. Yes.

MRS. FLOWER. Now, open up, that's it, wide — now under our tongue. That's the way. (*She remembers what comes next, and takes the patient's wrist. Looks at her own.*) Oh, I forgot my watch. Have you got a watch, Mrs. Parsons? (*Patient mutely shakes her head.*) Well, there's the clock in the kitchen. I can remember. It won't make but a few seconds difference. (*She looks into the living room and then dashes back and seizes the wrist. A baffled look comes over her face, and she goes round the bed and tries the other arm. Shakes her head.*) I can't seem to find — I don't believe you've got any pulse, Mrs. Parsons. (*She tries again.*) I can see it — (*She makes a dive for Mrs. Parsons' throat, and the*

“WHO PICKED MRS. FLOWER?”

patient chokes. She backs off.) Did I press too hard? I'm sorry. *(She runs to look at the clock again and then dashes back and counts the pulse in the throat.)* — thirty-nine — forty, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, fifty — two times fifty is a hundred. Is that sort of fast, Mrs. Parsons? *(She feels her own wrist.)* Well, I don't know, it's faster than mine, but then I often am subnormal. You know, it's much more dangerous to be below normal than above — you feel worse. I often don't feel well at all. Now, you'd think to look at me that I was just as strong as the next one, but I'm not. And these days with all the running around, going to classes and everything — Oh! *(She removes the thermometer. Mrs. Parsons sighs. She shakes it down.)* There, I got it down in one jerk.

MRS. PARSONS. Oh, Mrs. Flower.

MRS. FLOWER. Oh, wasn't that stupid of me? *(She looks at it.)* It's down so far, we'll never get it back up. *(She holds it over the radiator.)* I'll just warm it a little on the radiator, then — Oh!

MRS. PARSONS *(trying to raise herself)*. What happened?

MRS. FLOWER. It broke.

MRS. PARSONS *(resignedly)*. Oh . . .

MRS. FLOWER. Dear! And they're getting so expensive, too. *(Getting up with the fragments.)* Did you ever play with mercury when you were a child, Mrs. Parsons? It's just fascinating. *(She comes back to the bed.)* Maybe it's just as well not to know what your temperature is. If it's high, you'd only worry about it. I always think worry is the worst part of being sick. The less you know about things the better it is. Don't you think so?

MRS. PARSONS. I have to take some medicine at four o'clock. If you'd put it where I can reach it . . .

MRS. FLOWER. Oh, yes, Julia told me. Did you get the one at noon? *(Mrs. Parsons shakes her head.)* Then I guess you'd better take two pills now.

“WHO PICKED MRS. FLOWER?”

MRS. PARSONS. No, I don't think so.

MRS. FLOWER (*reading the directions*). One, three times a day. (*She takes one out.*) They're awfully small for that. But maybe — have you got a nail file around?

MRS. PARSONS. It's not four o'clock yet.

MRS. FLOWER. No, but I thought maybe we'd better take it now so we wouldn't forget. (*Mrs. Parsons shakes her head.*) You don't look very comfortable, Mrs. Parsons. Is there something I can do for you?

MRS. PARSONS (*with real interest*). I'd like my face washed.

MRS. FLOWER (*surprised*). Your face — Oh! Yes, I'd be glad to . . .

MRS. PARSONS. Just my wash cloth.

MRS. FLOWER. Yes. (*She goes out; calls back.*) Which one is it?

MRS. PARSONS (*feebly*). The one over the bath tub.

MRS. FLOWER (*calling*). Which one did you say?

[*Mrs. Parsons doesn't try to answer. Mrs. Flower comes in again with a wet wash cloth.*]

MRS. PARSONS. The one over the bath tub.

MRS. FLOWER. That's the one I've got. I have a sixth sense for things. There!

MRS. PARSONS (*taking it as she starts scrubbing*). I can wash my own.

[*She washes her face.*]

MRS. FLOWER (*standing by*). There, does that feel nice and cool? (*Mrs. Parsons' helpless wetness finally dawns on her.*) Oh! a towel! (*She goes out. Mrs. Parsons waves her hands feebly in the air. Mrs. Flower comes back with the towel, a tooth brush, and a glass of water.*) There you are, and I've brought your tooth brush. It's the red one, isn't it? I knew it. I always say there's nothing makes you feel so good when you're sick, as a nice mouth wash. (*Mrs. Parsons half sits up, with her aid, and goes to work. Mrs. Flower hangs up the wash cloth, and when she comes back, Mrs. Parsons has a*

“WHO PICKED MRS. FLOWER?”

mouthful of water and no place to put it.) What's the matter, Mrs. Parsons? (Mrs. Parsons is making gurgling noises, more and more alarming.) What is it, Mrs. Parsons? Oh, dear! Mrs. — Oh! (She rushes out and finally emerges with a large basin.) This is the only thing I could find! (Mrs. Parsons empties her mouth, rinses it out, and sighs, leaning back. Mrs. Flower gathers up the things and deposits them on the chair.)

Would you like me to brush your hair, Mrs. Parsons?

MRS. PARSONS (*feebly, but firmly, eyes closed*). No.

MRS. FLOWER. I'll just shake up your pillows, then.

That will make you feel better.

MRS. PARSONS. It's the crumbs that get in that are the worst.

MRS. FLOWER (*plumping the pillows*). Yes, I always think a comfortable bed is the most important thing there is.

Is that right?

MRS. PARSONS. My back. Farther down.

MRS. FLOWER (*pushing a pillow down, elevating the patient's back. Her head hangs down*). How's that?

MRS. PARSONS. Farther up.

MRS. FLOWER (*pulls it up*). Well, I always say there's a right way and a wrong way. There, is that better?

MRS. PARSONS (*exhausted*). It's all right. Anything — just as it is.

MRS. FLOWER. Well, now we're all bright and comfy. (*She sits down on the foot of the bed.*) You do look better, Mrs. Parsons. How do you feel, now? Better? (*A shock passes over the patient's face.*) What's the matter?

MRS. PARSONS. The hot water bottle!

MRS. FLOWER. What?

MRS. PARSONS. You're sitting on it!

MRS. FLOWER (*jumping up*). Is it leaking?

MRS. PARSONS. It's flooding!

MRS. FLOWER. Oh, good grief! Oh, dear! (*She snatches the blanket off of the foot of the bed and thrusts it inside*

“WHO PICKED MRS. FLOWER?”

the covers, after pulling out the hot water bottle and tossing it to the floor.) There! Can you feel it?

MRS. PARSONS. I think I'd better have a dry sheet. They're in the closet.

MRS. FLOWER. Yes, indeedly. I'll fix that in a minute.

[*She goes. Mrs. Parsons shifts about anxiously. Mrs. Flower comes back with sheets. She jerks the top sheet off with one motion, leaving the covers up on the patient's middle, her feet out.*]

MRS. PARSONS. Mrs. Flower . . .

MRS. FLOWER (*dropping the sheet on the chair*). Yes?

MRS. PARSONS. My feet. Would you cover them up?

MRS. FLOWER. There! (*She shifts the bed-clothes, leaving the top of Mrs. Parsons out.*) Now, I'll straighten this out.

MRS. PARSONS. The top sheet wasn't wet.

MRS. FLOWER. Oh. Well, it's just as well. (*She feels inside.*) It didn't go through to the mattress. I'll just whip this sheet off in a jiffy. Do you want to sit in the chair while I fix it?

MRS. PARSONS. I'm not allowed to get up.

MRS. FLOWER. Oh! This is a new problem. (*But she copes with it.*) Well, I'll just have to do it with you in it, then. Let's see. (*She thinks it out.*) Now just raise your feet — that's it — and I'll roll it up to the middle. That's fine. Now just raise up. I'll raise your shoulders, and roll this. Now, that's fine. Now — well — do you suppose you could — hm . . .

MRS. PARSONS (*sharply*). Leap into the air while you pull it out? No.

MRS. FLOWER. I don't believe that's the way. I think you start from the side. My, it's getting hot in here! (*She opens the window, and goes back to the struggle, panting.*) We'll just — now then, raise your shoulders, and I'll roll it back. Now, just raise your feet a minute. There, now we can start again. What's this?

MRS. PARSONS. It's the draw sheet.

“WHO PICKED MRS. FLOWER?”

MRS. FLOWER. Oh, yes. Well — how in the world can I get all that out? Just roll over a bit, Mrs. Parsons. That's it, now we're coming. Oh! Good grief! You're rolling up with it. Oh, heavens!

[*Mrs. Parsons is lost in the heap of bed-clothes.*

MRS. PARSONS (*from the pile*). You're smothering me!

MRS. FLOWER (*frantically pawing the heap of bed-clothes*).

Mrs. Parsons! Mrs. Parsons! Where are you?

[*Enter Mrs. Sanderson, a nurse.*

MRS. SANDERSON. What on earth is going on?

MRS. FLOWER (*hot and breathless, trying to hold up the load*). Oh, Mrs. Sanderson, help me, you're just in time!

MRS. SANDERSON (*puts down the bowl she has brought, and hurries over*). What's the matter?

MRS. FLOWER. I must try to get her into the chair while I make her bed.

MRS. SANDERSON. But I thought she wasn't supposed to be up!

MRS. FLOWER. She isn't, but I have to change the bed. The hot water bottle — it broke when I sat on it.

MRS. SANDERSON (*getting Mrs. Parsons out of the tangle*). Let her lie down. I can fix her bed. Shut the window, please, Mrs. Flower, she's in a draught.

MRS. PARSONS. Would you just straighten it out and leave me? I'll go to the hospital this evening.

MRS. SANDERSON (*expertly changing the bed*). Now, I'll have this straightened out in a minute, Mrs. Parsons. The hospital is full. I don't think you can get in — and they're short of nurses.

MRS. PARSONS (*tearfully*). I don't want to go to the hospital, but I don't feel as if I'd ever get well.

MRS. SANDERSON (*smoothing down the sheets*). You don't need to go to the hospital, Mrs. Parsons. Why, you're convalescent!

MRS. PARSONS. I've got to go to the hospital.

“WHO PICKED MRS. FLOWER?”

MRS. FLOWER (*finally recovering*). Is there anything I can do to help you?

[*Tries to pull the bed-clothes.*]

MRS. SANDERSON (*anxious to get her away from the bed*).

Yes, go get that chair.

MRS. FLOWER. Which chair — this one?

[*Dragging chair near the bed.*]

MRS. SANDERSON. Yes, that one.

MRS. FLOWER (*bumping the bed with the chair*). Shall I put it here?

MRS. SANDERSON. No, farther away.

MRS. FLOWER (*dragging chair away from the bed*). Here?

MRS. SANDERSON. Yes, that's right.

MRS. FLOWER. Now, what shall I do with it?

MRS. SANDERSON. Sit in it.

[*Mrs. Flower drops, deflated, into the chair.*]

MRS. FLOWER (*finally coming to, again*). Why, you *are* getting it straightened. How clever of you. It was the sheets that bothered me. I could have done it, if it hadn't been for the sheets. And that extra sheet — that pull sheet . . .

MRS. SANDERSON. Draw sheet.

MRS. FLOWER. Oh, yes, the draw sheet. If Mrs. Parsons had just given a leap into the air, I could have jerked it out, but she didn't seem to want to — oh, not that she couldn't co-operate but — why do you fix the corners that way?

MRS. SANDERSON. So as to hold them tight.

MRS. FLOWER. Oh, isn't that clever? I like to keep sick people company. I love to take them flowers and cheer them up. I think I have quite a talent for it. How are you now, Mrs. Parsons? Better?

[*Hanging over end of bed, and bumping it.*]

MRS. SANDERSON. Mrs. Flower, please take that custard out to the kitchen and put it into the refrigerator.

MRS. FLOWER. Oh, I'd be glad to.

[*Rushes out, stumbling over the door sill in her eagerness.*]

“WHO PICKED MRS. FLOWER?”

MRS. PARSONS. Oh, that Mrs. Flower! I think she has set me back a week.

MRS. SANDERSON. Oh, she means all right. How about your pillows? Now, does that feel better? (*Puts a pillow under her knees.*) There, that will keep you from slipping down.

MRS. PARSONS. Oh, that feels just like an arm chair.

MRS. FLOWER. There's a pill. Four o'clock. I was trying to cut it in thirds.

[*Mrs. Parsons nods.*]

MRS. SANDERSON (*reading*). She takes “one.” I'll write it down with her temperature, so your daughter can know what's been done.

MRS. FLOWER. The thermometer's been broken.

MRS. SANDERSON. I brought you over some custard. Julia said you didn't eat very well, but this will go down without your knowing it.

MRS. PARSONS. Thank you, Mrs. Sanderson. It's wonderful to have a nurse in the neighborhood. I didn't know you were a nurse.

MRS. SANDERSON. I'm not. I always thought I'd like to be, but I never did anything except at home.

MRS. FLOWER. But you must have had some training.

MRS. SANDERSON. I took the course, you know, the Home Nursing Course. That's all.

MRS. FLOWER. I guess I'll sign up.

MRS. PARSONS (*opening her eyes apprehensively*). Are you going to take the Home Nursing Course?

MRS. FLOWER. No, I'm going to take something easy.

[*She goes dolefully to the door.*]

MRS. SANDERSON. It isn't bad. It's meant for people who haven't done it before. It just takes practise.

MRS. FLOWER. Well, do you think they'll take anyone like me?

MRS. SANDERSON. Why, sure, I'll take you over. Here comes your daughter now, Mrs. Parsons.

MRS. FLOWER (*coming over solemnly*). Good-bye, Mrs.

“WHO PICKED MRS. FLOWER?”

Parsons. I won't be over again until I get my certificate.

Mrs. Parsons. That's all right, Mrs. Flower. You can practise on me. But wait till I get stronger!

Curtain

BRILLIANT PERFORMANCE

By

MARJORIE ALLEN

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CAST

HESTER, a middle-aged maid who has been with Linda Leslie for many years

CHRISTIE BAIRD, Linda's seventeen-year-old daughter

LINDA LESLIE, Broadway's leading actress

DANA RUPERT, Schoolgirl friend of Christie's

TIME. The present. Early in April.

PLACE. Linda Leslie's penthouse, New York City.

BRILLIANT PERFORMANCE

The scene is the New York penthouse of Linda Leslie. Directly center and extending upstage is a balcony overlooking the city, and on which is located a breakfast table with three chairs around it. On the table is a bouquet of daffodils. Upstage of this is a railing, and beyond is a backdrop of tall buildings in the distance. Overhead, extending out over the balcony, hangs a gaily colored awning.

Downstage is the living room, of which only the rear walls are seen. (These may very easily be drapes only.) On either side of the balcony doorway or arch are Venetian blinds. To the left is a small table with a telephone, and on the table an evening bag. Beside the table, and at its right, is a stool or hassock on which lies a stack of newspapers. To the right of the door is a small, luxurious chair. The entrance is at the right and out of sight behind the front curtains.

As the curtain rises, Hester is setting the table on the terrace. Her tray and serving table are out of sight on the right, and she goes to and fro. She is back of the table and to the left, putting on glasses of orange juice, as Christie enters from right.

CHRISTIE (*gaily*). Good morning, Hester!

HESTER (*looking up*). Good morning, Miss Christine.

CHRISTIE (*stops right of balcony*). Miss Christine! How formal, Hester! You didn't use to call me Miss when I'd got into mischief and had to be punished for my sins!

HESTER. That was years ago. You're grown up now.

CHRISTIE. But I'm still Christie.

HESTER (*smiles*). Did you get a good night's rest, Christie?

CHRISTIE. Heavenly! . . . (*Crosses left and looks over the table.*) What's for breakfast, Hester?

BRILLIANT PERFORMANCE

HESTER (*countering, right*). Orange juice, muffins, scrambled eggs and bacon, if you like, and milk.

CHRISTIE (*turning up nose*). Milk!

HESTER. What's the matter with milk?

CHRISTIE (*laughs*). Nothing — except that it doesn't quite fit this picture. (*Looks around room.*) Breakfast in the New York penthouse of Broadway's leading actress. I'll bet Mother doesn't drink milk for breakfast!

HESTER. I suppose you think she prefers cocktails.

CHRISTIE. Champagne, no less! Come to think of it, Hester, she's like champagne, all bubbling and sparkling and exciting.

HESTER. Humph! What do you know about champagne?

CHRISTIE. I can read, can't I? (*Goes to railing and looks out.*) Isn't it a gorgeous morning? Real spring weather! (*Back to table.*) And daffodils on the table! Oh, Hester, I'm so excited. Will Mother be up soon, do you think?

HESTER. Well, she was out pretty late last night.

CHRISTIE. She knows I'm here, doesn't she? Do you suppose she didn't find my note on her dressing table when she got in?

HESTER. I expect she did. Why didn't you let us know you were coming?

CHRISTIE. But I did, Hester. I wrote her I was going to spend spring vacation with her. She didn't forget, did she?

HESTER. She's been pretty busy lately.

CHRISTIE (*with interest*). A new play?

HESTER (*looks at her a bit oddly*). Yes . . .

CHRISTIE (*sits left of table*). Well, no wonder, then. I'd forgive her anything for that. She's awfully popular, isn't she? I mean, all the big producers want her, don't they? I don't blame them. I would, too, if I were a producer. She's wonderful!

BRILLIANT PERFORMANCE

HESTER (*smiles indulgently*). Such hero-worship!

CHRISTIE (*laughs*). I admit it. I guess I talk about her a lot, too. All the other girls at school are horribly jealous. And is there a scramble for the papers when her latest play is reviewed! We all pore over them — and are we ever furious if any critic dares say anything against her. Not that they ever really do, though. They always agree: — “Glorious Linda Leslie . . . smart and sophisticated . . . brilliant performance”! (*Rises, crosses thoughtfully to telephone table.*) You know, Hester, I’ve wondered ever so often how Stevie could have done it.

HESTER. Done what?

CHRISTIE (*coming to stand back of chair again*). Got a divorce from Mother. She has simply everything. I should think Stevie’s life would be awfully dull and dreary without her.

HESTER. Maybe he finds it quiet and restful not having to be a permanent audience.

CHRISTIE. How funny you say that! . . . Well, it’s certainly quiet all right.

HESTER. How is your father, by the way — and Mrs. Baird?

CHRISTIE. They’re fine. Ruth is really a dear, although she’s not a bit like Mother. She’s almost mousy, sometimes. And little Susan’s a darling. She’s six now. She goes to public school and lives right at home. That seems strange to me. I can’t remember the time when I wasn’t away at school. But with a mother who’s an actress, of course . . .

HESTER. Of course.

CHRISTIE. You know, I used to be rather jealous of the other girls, those who had homes to go to at vacation times. But other things made up for it. Like the times when Mother’d drop by for a flying visit. I remember one night when she came. She had on a scarlet evening dress, with golden sandals, and some sort of shiny things

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in her hair. And she smelled of the loveliest perfume. The girls hung over the railing to get a glimpse of her . . . and we talked about it for days afterwards. (*Hester smiles but says nothing.*) And I'll never forget the time she sent a trunk full of costumes and things when we were giving a play. That was wonderful! And you know, Hester, when I thanked her for it later, she didn't seem to know what I was talking about.

HESTER (*strangely*). She's very forgetful sometimes.

CHRISTIE. Imagine her taking time out to do something nice, and then not wanting to be thanked for it.

HESTER. Er . . . yes. How *is* your acting coming, speaking of plays, Christie?

CHRISTIE (*struggling with her excitement*). Oh, I can't hold it a second longer, or I'll bust! (*Sits left of table.*)

Can you keep a secret, Hester?

HESTER (*dryly*). I've had lots of practice.

CHRISTIE. Well, acting is one of the reasons I'm in New York now.

HESTER (*sitting in chair center of table*). Stop being mysterious and tell me about it.

CHRISTIE. You knew I had the lead in the last school play, didn't you? . . . By the way, Mother said she was coming, but she didn't. Do you know why?

HESTER. When was it?

CHRISTIE. Last Friday. Was she busy or something?

HESTER (*thinking rapidly*). I believe she was entertaining for charity.

CHRISTIE. That explains it, then. I thought it must have been something important, or wild horses couldn't have kept her away (*Jokingly.*) from seeing her own daughter perform!

HESTER. Well, what about this secret of yours?

CHRISTIE. Oh, yes. Well, Sam Rupert was there Friday. You've heard of him, haven't you?

HESTER. Who hasn't? But what was a big producer doing at a school play?

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CHRISTIE. He's Dana Rupert's uncle, and she had a small part in the play. But here's the wonderful part, Hester: he liked me!

HESTER. Amazing!

CHRISTIE. No, honestly! He came back after the show and asked me if I was interested in going on the stage, that he had a part coming up that I might do.

HESTER. Did he know you were Linda Leslie's daughter?

CHRISTIE. No, I made Dana promise not to tell. I didn't think it was fair to trade on Mother's reputation. Anyway, when I told him I was going to be in New York this week, he said to come in and read for him.

HESTER. Are you going to?

CHRISTIE. I already have! Yesterday! I was scared silly, of course, but Dana went with me.

HESTER. What happened?

CHRISTIE. Well, I don't think I read very well, but he seemed to like me anyhow. Because when I finished, he asked me if I'd like to play the part, that it was mine if I wanted it. Oh, Hester, it's a simply super part — a young English girl who falls in love with an American soldier.

HESTER. What did you tell Mr. Rupert?

CHRISTIE. Of course I said "Yes." I'm to go back today to sign the contract.

HESTER. Does your mother know about this?

CHRISTIE (*rising*). No, and that's why I'm so excited. I can hardly wait to tell her. Why doesn't she wake up? Do you suppose I could blow some whistles or ring a few bells, just as a gentle hint?

[*Buzzer sounds off stage.*]

HESTER. Speaking of bells, there's her ring now, so you won't have long to wait. (*Rises, picks up tray, and starts for the door, then turns back.*) By the way, if I were you, I don't believe I'd mention this news of yours until after she's had breakfast.

CHRISTIE. I expect you're right. She'd probably be so

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excited, she wouldn't be able to eat a thing. (*Hester smiles curiously, exits. Christie walks over to hassock, picks up newspaper, looks through it, stops at an item.*) That's queer! (*Turns back to look at date.*) Saturday, April 10th. I thought Hester said . . . (*Stops, shrugs, turns to another page. Pretending to read aloud.*) "Glorious Christine Baird . . . smart and sophisticated . . . brilliant performance!" (*Tosses paper down, laughing at herself.*) Rot! I've a long way to go before I can be like Linda Leslie . . . if I ever am!

[*Starts toward table.*]

LINDA (*from offstage*). Christie, baby!

[*Sweeps on from right, her arms out toward Christie.*]

CHRISTIE (*going toward her*). Mother!

LINDA (*hugging her*). Darling, why didn't you let me know you were coming?

CHRISTIE. But I did, Mother! I wrote you a letter.

LINDA. Oh, that! That was two weeks ago. I couldn't remember my own birthday that long. You should have wired. Hester fixed you up for the night, didn't she?

CHRISTIE. Yes, thanks.

LINDA. Good. (*Starting for table.*) And now for some breakfast!

[*Sits at right, Christie at left. Hester enters with loaded tray.*]

LINDA (*takes drink of orange juice*). Darling, it's wonderful to see you. And you're looking marvelous!

[*Hester comes to table with dish in hand.*]

LINDA. Goodness, Hester, cereal? You know I never . . .

HESTER (*setting it in front of Christie*). It's for Miss Christie.

LINDA. Oh, yes, of course. Now, Christie, I'm going to be very maternal and tell you that you must eat every bit of it; it's good for you!

CHRISTIE (*laughs, starts to eat*). Yes, Mother.

LINDA. Christie! Don't tell me you like that — that

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distasteful stuff? But you do! I can see that you do!
No wonder you're so disgustingly healthy!

[*Christie pushes bowl away.*]

LINDA (*over her shoulder*). Just Melba toast and black coffee for me, Hester. (*Turns back to Christie.*) When you're an actress, you have to watch your weight. How lucky you are, dear!

CHRISTIE. Mother, there's something I want to . . .

HESTER (*interrupting, says meaningfully*). Your milk, Miss Christie!

LINDA. Yes, dear?

CHRISTIE. Oh, nothing. I've forgotten what I was going to say.

LINDA. You must learn to be more coherent, dear. (*Hester puts on coffee, toast. Linda continues half-jokingly.*) Why else do I send you to such an expensive school? (*Tastes her coffee.*) How is Lakehurst now?

CHRISTIE. Just fine.

LINDA. I'm so glad. . . . Any new romances in your life?

CHRISTIE (*laughs*). Hardly, not at Lakehurst!

LINDA. What a pity you didn't let me know sooner about your coming. A friend of mine, a very nice man, has such a charming nephew about your age. We might have arranged some fun . . . but there's hardly time now. When must you go back?

CHRISTIE. Oh, I'm staying all week.

LINDA (*in dismay*). All week?

CHRISTIE. This is spring vacation, Mother. Don't you want me. . . . Am I in the way?

LINDA (*recovering herself*). Of course I want you, sweet. It's only that I have so much to do: rehearsals, fittings, photographs. I thought you usually spent your vacations with your father.

CHRISTIE. Stevie and Ruth wanted me to come, but I was there Christmas and semester vacations, so I . . .

LINDA. So you had all the domesticity you could stand, is that it? I don't wonder! By the way, how is Stevie?

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CHRISTIE. He's fine.

LINDA. And your stepmother?

CHRISTIE. So is she.

LINDA. Does she still do her own housework?

CHRISTIE (*on the defensive*). She has a woman in to do the washing and cleaning, but she does the rest.

LINDA. How exciting!

CHRISTIE (*with enthusiasm*). Little Susan's cute. You'd love her, Mother.

LINDA (*protestingly*). Oh, Christie! I loved you, darling, but you were my own! . . . Poor Stevie, he rather let himself in for it, didn't he?

CHRISTIE. Why do you say "poor Stevie"?

LINDA. Well, he was hardly cut out for that type of life, that routine way of living. An office five days a week, mowing the lawn on Saturday afternoon, a little drive on Sunday, two weeks' vacation in the summer. . . . Oh, not Stevie!

CHRISTIE. He doesn't seem to mind it, Mother. In fact, I think he rather likes it.

LINDA (*suddenly irritated*). But let's not talk about Stevie any more. Let's talk about you. Tell me, darling, did you know I was starting rehearsals on a new play next week?

CHRISTIE. Hester mentioned it. Is it a good play?

LINDA. I'm terribly excited about it.

CHRISTIE. What's it like?

LINDA. It's about a young English girl, Diana Winslowe's her name, who falls in love with an American flyer. They go out dancing one evening; there's an air raid, and he's injured. So she takes him to her country home to nurse him back to health.

CHRISTIE. Then what?

LINDA. Well, there's a younger sister, Phyllis, who falls in love with him, too. But in the end she goes away and leaves Diana and Kirk together. Doesn't it sound simply marvelous?

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CHRISTIE. Yes — yes, it does.

LINDA. What's the matter, Christie? You don't sound the least bit interested, I must say.

CHRISTIE. Oh, but I am, Mother. It's just such a coincidence!

LINDA. Coincidence?

CHRISTIE. Yes. I'm going to play Phyllis.

LINDA (*rising*). You?

CHRISTIE. Yes, isn't it fun?

LINDA. But — but how . . .

CHRISTIE. Mr. Rupert saw me in the play we just did at school, and he liked me.

LINDA. What play?

CHRISTIE. The one last Friday, "The Green Forest." Remember? You were coming to see it.

LINDA. Good heavens, was it *last* Friday? I thought . . . (*Contritely*.) Darling, I really intended to come, but there was some last minute business I couldn't get out of.

CHRISTIE (*her eyes go to the newspaper for a split second*). Oh, it doesn't matter, of course.

LINDA. But it does matter, darling! I should have loved to have seen you. (*Sits.*) And so Sam saw your little play and liked it?

CHRISTIE. Yes. He asked me to read for him, and I did, and he wants me to play Phyllis.

LINDA. Of course you told him you couldn't.

CHRISTIE. Why no, Mother. I'm to go back today to sign the contract.

LINDA (*decisively*). It's quite out of the question, Christie.

CHRISTIE. But why?

LINDA. In the first place, you're too young. And in the second, you haven't finished school yet.

CHRISTIE. It's only a month and a half, Mother, and this is such a wonderful opportunity. A part in a Sam Rupert play! Things like that just don't happen very often. And as for my being young, I'm seventeen. You'd starred in one play when you were my age, and

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within another year you'd married Stevie and had me, too.
How can you say I'm too young?

LINDA. That was different! I was older for my age.
You've always been so protected. You don't know how
to take care of yourself.

CHRISTIE. Oh, all mothers think that!

LINDA. Besides, think of what it cost me — my marriage
to Stevie a failure — never a home of my own to keep
my little girl . . .

CHRISTIE (*laughing*). Mother! How melodramatic!

LINDA. Christie! (*Coldly*.) I don't care to discuss it
any further. You're going back to school at the end of
the week and finish your year out. There's time enough
later to think of your future.

CHRISTIE (*protesting*). But, Mother, Mr. Rupert wants
to go into rehearsal immediately. He can't hold the
part for me until school is out.

LINDA (*rises, goes right*). I'm not sure I want you to go
on the stage, Christie. It's a hard life, and I want some-
thing better for you: a nice man, perhaps, a home of
your own, trips abroad when the war's over, babies some
day (*Turns back to table, says charmingly*.) . . . but
not too soon, darling. I'm too young to be a grand-
mother!

CHRISTIE (*rises. Intensely*). Those plans of yours sound
very nice, Mother, but don't you see — I want to act!
Mr. Rupert, others, think I have talent. Maybe I don't,
but at least I've got to try. Don't you remember how
you felt when you were my age?

LINDA. I think a nice, easy life might have tempted me,
but I had to support myself.

CHRISTIE. You didn't when you married Stevie. You
could have quit the stage then and had your own home.
But you stayed on the stage, and that's what I want to
do, too.

LINDA (*angrily*). Christie, let's not get so intense about
it this early in the morning. It'll wear me out for the

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whole day. (*They take their seats again. Linda takes a drink of coffee. Suddenly.*) I'll tell you what. Suppose I do some telephoning and cancel my appointments for today. Then we can go shopping. Wouldn't you like some new clothes?

CHRISTIE. I'm not exactly interested in clothes at the moment.

LINDA. No, I can see you aren't. Where *did* you get that rag? It's not your style at all. You must be more careful about such things, Christie. I saw the cutest little frock . . . Hand me that magazine, will you, darling? (*Christie gets it from under telephone table.*) Let's see, where was it? Oh, yes, look dear, isn't this cunning?

CHRISTIE. I'm afraid that isn't my style either, Mother.

LINDA. You'd look young and sweet in it.

CHRISTIE. That's just the trouble.

LINDA. And your hair! Where ever do you get it done?

CHRISTIE. Dana does it for me.

LINDA. Dana?

CHRISTIE. Yes, Dana Rupert, Sam Rupert's niece. By the way, she's coming here this morning. We're going together to his office to sign the contract.

LINDA. Coming here? How nice. I'd love to meet your friend.

CHRISTIE. She's a real friend, too. The kind who believes in you, who backs you up in whatever you do, if you think it's right. I owe Dana a lot.

LINDA. But not because of that coiffure, my sweet. I'm going to call Emile and make an appointment for you this very morning.

CHRISTIE. Not *this* morning, Mother. I'll be busy all morning.

[*Sound of bell.*]

CHRISTIE. That's probably Dana now.

[*Jumps to feet and starts right.*]

LINDA. Hester will go, darling.

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CHRISTIE (*laughs and returns to seat*). I'm sorry. At school we all rush for the door.

LINDA. I thought you had maids there.

CHRISTIE. We do, but it's much more exciting to go yourself. You never know what you'll find standing on the doorstep — somebody's maiden aunt, a little boy selling "Saturday Evening Post"s, your young man to take you to the village picture show. It's fun.

HESTER (*enters, followed by Dana*). Miss Rupert to see you, Miss Christie.

[*Hester exits.*]

CHRISTIE (*running right to greet Dana*). I've been expecting you, Dana. I was just telling Mother all about you. (*She comes back, stands left of Linda, and Dana is at right.*) Mother, this is Dana Rupert.

LINDA (*charmingly*). How nice to know you, Dana!

Christie was certainly enthusiastic, to say the least.

DANA (*impressed by Linda*). That was sweet of her, Miss Leslie, but you mustn't believe too much of what Christie says. She's just being nice, I'm afraid.

LINDA. Aren't you the modest child! Christie, run get a glass of orange juice for Dana.

[*Christie starts right.*]

DANA. No, really, I couldn't.

LINDA. But of course you can. And Christie (*Christie stops, looks back.*) tell Hester to make it a large glass.

CHRISTIE. I'll be right back.

[*Exits.*]

LINDA. Sit down, Dana. (*Dana sits in chair to right of arch.*) I had to get Christie out of the room for a moment. (*Pulls her chair closer.*) I must talk to you. What's all this nonsense about your uncle's putting Christie in his new play? He oughtn't to encourage the child.

DANA. He thinks she's wonderful, Miss Leslie, really he does. He says she has one of the finest talents he's seen

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in years. And he's awfully anxious to have her in his play.

LINDA. Oh. Oh, I see. Look here, Dana, you seem to be a sensible girl, not at all emotional like Christie. Can't you help me convince her that she must go back and finish school?

DANA. I don't know. She's awfully keen on doing this play.

LINDA (*rises, goes left*). Perhaps. But her education comes first. And she's so young. (*Dramatically.*) I can't bear to think of all that lovely bloom taken off her by the harsh reality of stage life. It makes one old so soon.

DANA. Not you, Miss Leslie.

LINDA. You don't know how old I feel sometimes — the mother of a grown daughter like Christie. I can hardly believe it. (*Back to Dana, pleadingly.*) Dana, please say you'll help me talk Christie out of this crazy scheme of hers.

DANA (*hesitantly*). Well, I'll try. If you think it's best.

LINDA. Oh, I do, I do, believe me. Here she comes now. (*Back to chair.*) And are you as enthusiastic about Lakehurst as Christie is?

[*Christie enters, with glass of orange juice, which she hands to Dana.*

DANA. Thanks, Christie. (*Christie crosses left to chair.*) Yes, I certainly am. I love it there.

LINDA. I imagine it's beautiful this time of year. And in June, Christie, you mustn't let me forget to come to graduation. I have the world's worst memory for important dates, Dana, even my own birthday.

CHRISTIE. She never forgets a line, though. I hope I can do as well. Although I get stage fright horribly. Do you, Mother?

LINDA. Always. By the way, why don't we take in a play this afternoon? Perhaps we could do our shopping this

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morning, Christie, if Dana would like to come along. Then we could have lunch somewhere and go to a show. How would you like that?

CHRISTIE. Lunch and the show would be fine, Mother, but this morning, remember, I have to see Mr. Rupert.

LINDA. Oh, Christie, let's not go all over that again. You're going back to school, darling. Believe me, it's the only thing to do. Isn't it, Dana?

DANA. Well, I—I think maybe you ought to finish, Christie. It's such a short time until graduation.

CHRISTIE. But, Dana . . .

LINDA. And then we can find a good dramatic school for you, dear, some place where they can teach you to get rid of some of these terrible habits of yours — your slouch, your bad enunciation, the way you walk.

CHRISTIE (*hurt*). Am I that bad?

LINDA. You're not *bad*, Christie, you're just not good. Darling, you'd make a laughing stock of yourself if you were to appear on Broadway now. You're going to need a lot of training first. So now it's all settled, isn't it?

CHRISTIE (*rising. Desperately*). No — no, it isn't.

LINDA. } Christie!
DANA. }

CHRISTIE. I'm going to sign that contract.

LINDA (*jumps to feet*). Christie, I forbid it. You're under age. You can't sign without your parent's consent, and I won't give it!

CHRISTIE (*unbelieving*). You don't mean that, Mother!

LINDA. Oh, don't I? I won't have you in Mr. Rupert's play.

DANA (*rises, intervenes*). Christie, don't you think you'd better come back to Lakehurst? There'll be other plays.

CHRISTIE (*puzzled, hurt*). Why did you change your mind so quickly, Dana? You were all for it yesterday.

DANA (*lamely*). Well, I . . . Your mother . . .

CHRISTIE. What about Mother? Oh, I see. So that's

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why you sent me for the orange juice instead of ringing for Hester. So you could get Dana on your side.

LINDA. Christie!

CHRISTIE. Oh, please, Mother, I've got to do this play! Don't you see? Won't you understand?

LINDA. Christie, I'm not going to have you in that play. I'm not going to be in the same play with my daughter.

CHRISTIE. Why not?

LINDA. It wouldn't be fair to you, darling. After all, I've had so much more experience.

CHRISTIE. And if I'm willing to take the chance?

LINDA. Please, let's not discuss it, Christie!

CHRISTIE. I'd rather, if you don't mind. I think I'm beginning to understand. You don't really care whether I go back to school. You don't really care *what* I do, as long as I stay out of your way — in the background!

LINDA. How can you say that, Christie? I'm your mother!

CHRISTIE. You wanted to keep Stevie in the background, didn't you? Your permanent audience!

LINDA. No!

CHRISTIE. Only Stevie walked out on you. I've often wondered why. Now I'm beginning to see.

LINDA. Christie, that's not true.

CHRISTIE. I think it is, Mother. You know, this has been like a jigsaw puzzle to me. Nothing makes sense until you find one certain piece. But when you find that piece and fit it into place, suddenly you see the whole pattern spread out before you — and you wonder why you've been so blind as not to see it before.

LINDA. Dana, can't you stop her?

DANA. Christie, don't say these things! You'll only be sorry for them tomorrow.

CHRISTIE. Let me alone, Dana. I've got to get this straightened out.

LINDA (*patiently*). There's nothing *to* straighten out,

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Christie. You're going to tell Mr. Rupert, "No, not yet," and then you're going back to school.

DANA. It's only for six weeks, Christie.

[Sits.]

CHRISTIE. Mother, why don't you want me in this play with you?

LINDA. I've already told you . . .

CHRISTIE (*interrupting*). No, I mean your real reason.

LINDA. I don't know what you mean.

CHRISTIE. Oh, yes, you do. You don't want anyone to know you have a daughter my age!

LINDA. Don't be ridiculous!

CHRISTIE. What will the papers say? "Glorious Linda Leslie . . . smart, sophisticated" . . . and her seventeen-year-old daughter, Christie Baird!

LINDA. Well, it's hardly what you'd call favorable publicity!

CHRISTIE. But don't you see, Mother, no one knows who I am.

LINDA. You mean Sam Rupert doesn't . . .

CHRISTIE. I'm just Christie Baird to him. He doesn't know we're related.

LINDA. But someone would find out. It wouldn't be long before everyone would know Linda Leslie had a grown daughter.

CHRISTIE. Would that be so bad? Wouldn't you enjoy being proud of me? Isn't there room in the spotlight for both of us?

LINDA. No! I've had to fight every inch of the way to get where I am. You don't understand, Christie!

CHRISTIE. Yes, I do! Suddenly I understand very well. You're afraid of me, Mother!

LINDA. Afraid?

CHRISTIE. Yes, afraid! Afraid of your own daughter!

LINDA. How absurd!

CHRISTIE. You're afraid of getting old, afraid that I might someday take your place. So you want me to

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stay your little daughter, your adoring public, your permanent audience, as Hester said.

LINDA. Stop it! I won't have any more of this. You're being very young and very melodramatic. (*Crosses to telephone.*) I'm going to phone Sam Rupert and tell him he's not to let you sign that contract.

[*Picks up receiver.*]

CHRISTIE. I wouldn't, Mother.

LINDA (*phone still in hand and without turning*). Are you threatening me?

CHRISTIE. Call it that if you like. I'm warning you, Mother, it won't do you any good to phone Mr. Rupert. You can't stop me from signing that contract.

LINDA (*putting receiver back and spinning around*). Why can't I?

CHRISTIE. Because Stevie's my guardian, too. And he already knows about it and approves.

LINDA. So you've already phoned him about it.

CHRISTIE. No, he and Ruth came to my play last Friday, the night you were entertaining for charity. (*With a look at the newspapers.*) Or wasn't it Craig Allison that night?

LINDA (*following her glance*). I—I don't remember.

CHRISTIE. Never mind. It's not important now.

[*Starts right.*]

LINDA. What are you going to do?

CHRISTIE (*turns and faces Linda*). I'm going to play Phyllis. (*Laughs suddenly.*) You know, Mother, all of a sudden I like my hair the way it is. I like my clothes, too, and my bad enunciation, and the way I walk! (*Goes toward door.*) Coming, Dana?

DANA (*after one last look at Linda*). Yes—oh, yes, Christie!

[*Follows her to door.*]

LINDA. Christie, darling!

CHRISTIE (*comes back once more*). You know, you shouldn't ever play mother parts. You'll be much better

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as Diana. That'll be a brilliant performance. And I wouldn't worry if I were you; you don't really look thirty-five.

[Exits. Linda turns to telephone, picks up receiver furiously, starts to dial. Then she stops, thinks a moment, and hangs up. She takes evening bag from table, pulls out mirror, goes center, examines face anxiously. Then, in a sudden fury at what she sees, she dashes mirror to floor.]

Curtain

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST
By
BETTY BROWN & ROBERT KNIPE

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CAST

GRUNDY MCKAY

VAL, *his wife*

LOU ANN, *his sister*

FLAVIA, *his visitor*

TIME. Afternoon of a day during the War.

PLACE. Living room of a small house just outside New York City. The home of Grundy and Val McKay.

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST

It is the living room of a small, tastefully furnished house, just outside New York City, the home of Val and Grundy McKay.

It is not an elaborate room, but one that is exceedingly comfortable and tasteful, and it has a pleasant "lived-in" look. Down right is a fireplace, and up right a door leading into other parts of the house. In the rear wall French doors are open, and on either side prettily curtained windows. There are two windows in the left wall. There is a big easy chair with a small table beside it, in front of the fireplace. Down left center, on an angle, is a sofa with coffee table in front of it. These are the only pieces of furniture essential to the action of the play. Against the rear wall, there may be small tables, light, delicate chairs, a desk at left and desk chair, lamps, wall bookshelves, and other pieces which will add to the beauty of the room.

At rise, the room is empty with the exception of Grundy McKay. He stands for a moment reflectively, up by center doors. Then, with a little gesture of impatience, he comes down and seats himself, picks up a magazine from the table, glances through it and throws it down. He puts his head back, drums his fingers and whistles, all with an abstracted, preoccupied air. Val, his wife, appears at center and sees him, comes in on tiptoe, and puts her hands over his eyes. Grundy is about twenty-six, good-looking, honest. He is dressed in the uniform of a private in the army of the United States. Val is around twenty-three, pretty, charming, not bright, but altogether lovely.

VAL. Guess who!

GRUNDY (*pretending to think*). Hummm . . . Mrs. Roosevelt?

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST

VAL. She's in Cuba. Guess again.

GRUNDY. I can't, darling. Your scent confuses me.

VAL. At fifteen dollars an ounce it ought to bark.

GRUNDY (*pulling her around beside him*). Honey, I'd know your fleur d'cabbage anywhere.

VAL. You ought to, you gave it to me. Where's your sister?

GRUNDY. Around. Why?

VAL. I'm just glad she's not here, that's why.

GRUNDY (*laughing*). You invited her out.

VAL. I know. I thought I ought. I knew you'd want to see your sister, but I'd much rather have you all to myself.

GRUNDY. I know, but sis likes to see me.

VAL. Of course she does, darling. And you'll want to see Sylvia and Gerald, so they're coming later today.

GRUNDY. Well, Sylvia's all right, but I can't say the same for Uncle Gerald.

VAL. I couldn't ask Sylvia without your uncle, dope.

GRUNDY (*a little sadly*). You know, they *won't* give us much time to ourselves, will they? We've had so little time together since we were married.

VAL. I know. I wish we could be alone for one whole week with nobody else around to talk to us or have anything to do with us. That would be my idea of heaven.

GRUNDY. And mine. But Uncle Sam looks at things in a funny way, honey. Anyway, the relatives'll stay only a day or so, probably over night.

VAL. I know. But after that it'll be only a matter of hours before you have to go back to that dreadful camp.

GRUNDY. Not *that* soon.

VAL. Nearly.

GRUNDY. Forget it, honey. It's a long way off, yet.

VAL. All right, but it's hard to forget . . .

GRUNDY. I know, darling. For me too. (*He rises abruptly and goes up to doors. Then he turns.*) Val, darling, I . . .

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST

VAL (*hopefully*). Yes?

GRUNDY (*he pauses; then laughs*). Oh, well, hell! Where's that rapsallion sister of mine?

VAL (*slightly disappointed*). In the garden, probably.

[*Lou Ann, enters. She is a pretty, vivacious girl, several years younger than Grundy.*]

LOU ANN. Were you talking about me? Want me, Grundy?

GRUNDY (*teasing*). Not particularly.

LOU ANN. You better had, you great big wonderful soldier!

[*She goes to him and throws her arms around his neck.*]

GRUNDY (*pleased*). Listen to her, Val! What can you do with her!

VAL (*laughing*). I'll leave her to you.

LOU ANN. I spoil him to death, don't I, Val?

VAL. I'm afraid we both do.

LOU ANN. I do more than you. It's bad for him. You haven't been married to him long enough to spoil him yet, but I suppose you will.

VAL. I suppose so.

LOU ANN. Here, Grundy. Sit over here on the couch.

[*She drags him to sofa.*]

GRUNDY. Thanks.

LOU ANN. Let me fix the pillow.

[*She does so.*]

GRUNDY. Boy! This is service!

LOU ANN (*kneeling in front of the couch*). I wish you could get leaves every week.

GRUNDY. So do I. My first sergeant would never *dream* of offering me a pillow.

LOU ANN. Comfy?

GRUNDY. Fine.

LOU ANN (*suddenly thinking of something else*). Want a drink of water?

GRUNDY. I don't mind.

[*He grins.*]

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST

VAL (*willingly*). I'll get it, Grundy.

LOU ANN (*eagerly*). I'd just as soon.

GRUNDY. Sure, Val, let sis get it. You sit down; take it easy.

LOU ANN. Be back in a minute.

[*She exits gleefully.*]

GRUNDY. No need for you to go, honey. With Uncle Gerald and Sylvia coming, you'll be busy enough later.

VAL (*hesitatingly*). Grundy . . .

GRUNDY. Yeah?

VAL (*getting it over with*). Grundy, when are you going?

GRUNDY. Where . . . back to camp?

VAL. No. Not camp.

GRUNDY. Where? What do you mean, darling?

VAL. When are you going . . . (*Pause.*) over?

GRUNDY. Oh. (*Then casually.*) I don't — know. Sometime fairly soon, I suppose.

VAL. Oh, Grundy, I don't want you to go.

[*She goes to him, presses against him.*]

GRUNDY (*putting his arms around her*). Hell, there's nothing I can do about it, honey. And you knew it was coming. Anyway, it isn't for a good while yet.

VAL. But it was always so far in the future, and somehow when it's like that, you can forget it for a while — make yourself not think about it — almost make yourself believe it isn't going to happen at all. Then all of a sudden, it's almost on top of you, so close . . .

[*Lou Ann enters with the water pitcher and glasses on a tray. Val moves quickly away from Grundy.*]

LOU ANN. Oh. Sorry.

GRUNDY. That's all right, sis. Come in.

LOU ANN. Here's the water, Grundy.

[*She puts the tray on the coffee table and pours him a glass.*]

GRUNDY. Thanks, sis.

LOU ANN. Doesn't he look nice in his uniform, Val? I can't get over it, Grundy. (*She goes behind sofa.*)

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST

When are you going to be an officer with a lot of fancy trappings?

GRUNDY (*stretching lazily and sipping his water*). Oh, one of these days — after the war's over.

LOU ANN (*with admiration*). You're arrogant, aren't you, my good brother?

GRUNDY. Just brave. Watch the slow steady movements of my chest. (*He raises himself up and demonstrates as he talks.*) I have the best chest in the whole United States Army. See the proud set of my shoulders — best in company B. And my biceps — boy! My biceps!

LOU ANN (*laughing*). Your sergeant just groans with envy, I bet!

GRUNDY (*pretending surprise*). How did you know?

LOU ANN. Why don't you take a quick canter around the room? Give your biceps a break.

GRUNDY (*scolding*). You bad girl! Haven't you read the instructions, "Be kind to service men."

LOU ANN (*twisting her fingers in his hair*). Aren't I kind to you, Grundy, my pet?

GRUNDY. Very, my "angel." I don't know what I'd do without you.

[*He stretches again. During the last two lines, Flavia has put in an appearance. She is a very beautiful, tall dark girl, quite ethereal. In fact, she's so ethereal no one sees her but Grundy. She is smiling strangely. She is attired in a flowing white gown.*]

LOU ANN (*coaxingly*). And aren't I the best little sister in the world?

FLAVIA (*quietly*). Hello, Private McKay. (*Grundy sees her and starts slightly. Neither Val nor Lou Ann is aware of her presence.*) It must be exquisite to be so big and brave and patriotic and gay. You're making quite an impression on your little sister.

GRUNDY (*blinking*). What?

LOU ANN. I said, aren't I the best . . .

GRUNDY. I wasn't talking to you.

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST

VAL (*half rising from chair, wonderingly*). Grundy, what is it?

FLAVIA (*amused*). They're quite worth impressing, Private McKay.

GRUNDY. Now wait a minute here . . .

[*He starts to rise. Flavia laughs lightly and disappears through center doors.*]

LOU ANN. Grundy!

GRUNDY (*baffled*). That girl! Who the hell . . .

VAL. What girl?

GRUNDY. That girl — there — in the doorway!

VAL (*completely bewildered*). There wasn't any girl in the doorway.

GRUNDY (*insistently*). There was, I tell you.

LOU ANN (*trying to be practical*). You just sit tight. Let me get you some water!

[*She moves to do so, until he stops her.*]

GRUNDY. I don't *want* any water!

LOU ANN. It wouldn't be safe to give you anything stronger.

GRUNDY. Don't give me anything. That girl — I swear . . .

[*Flavia's head appears around door frame.*]

FLAVIA (*hoarsely*). Shhhhhh! There *isn't* any girl. Don't make yourself ridiculous.

GRUNDY (*starting up again*). Well, I'll be damned!

FLAVIA. You needn't get so worked up!

GRUNDY (*rising*). You — confound it, who *are* you?

LOU ANN (*innocently*). Why, Grundy — I'm — I'm — Lou Ann!

GRUNDY (*sharply*). Not you!

VAL. You — you mean *me*, Grundy?

GRUNDY (*wildly*). No! NO!

VAL (*crossing to him, worried*). Maybe he's tired — maybe we ought to let him rest, Lou Ann.

FLAVIA. Heavens, on my account?

GRUNDY. Yes, confound it!

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST

LOU ANN (*hurt*). Grundy, you don't need to be nasty.

GRUNDY. I wasn't talking to you!

VAL (*even more hurt*). To me, Grundy?

GRUNDY (*suffering*). No! No!! NO!!

[*He sinks to the sofa.*]

LOU ANN (*soothingly*). Look, Grundy, did something happen at camp, something you didn't tell us about?

Have you been working too hard — are you ill?

GRUNDY. No, no, nothing like that.

VAL. Then what is it, darling. Tell me!

GRUNDY. I'll tell you what it is! It's something I've got to straighten out!

FLAVIA (*lightly*). It's no use carrying on like that, Private McKay. I'll have to see you alone, I'm afraid.

[*She disappears again.*]

GRUNDY. Damn!

VAL. Darling . . .

GRUNDY (*bewildered*). Please — leave me alone. I've got to think. Everything seems to be grinding in my head.

LOU ANN. I always told you you should have thought more when you were a little boy.

GRUNDY. Look, Lou Ann — Val, look at me, look at me from a purely scientific viewpoint. What do you see? Is anything wrong?

LOU ANN. Your hair needs combing.

VAL. You look peaked, darling.

GRUNDY. Is there anything else?

LOU ANN. I think you'd better lie down.

GRUNDY (*rising, pacing*). No! I've got to get this thing settled once and for all. I'll never be any good until I figure out what it's all about.

LOU ANN (*seriously*). Would you like us to go?

GRUNDY. It mightn't be a bad idea. Just leave me alone for a bit.

LOU ANN. All right. Perhaps he *does* need a rest, Val. Let's go.

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST

VAL. All right, just a second.

LOU ANN. Call me if you want anything, Grundy.

[She exits.]

VAL. Darling, I'm worried. Lie down here.

[She leads him back to the sofa.]

GRUNDY. All right, all right, but I'm telling you there was a girl . . .

VAL. Yes, darling. Is the pillow all right?

[She arranges it for him.]

GRUNDY. Fine. For Pete's sake, didn't you see her?

VAL. Now, don't think of it anymore. You'll just make yourself worse. *(She strokes his forehead.)* There, how does that feel?

GRUNDY *(impatiently)*. Like your hand scraping my face, of course. Take it away, will you please? I want to think!

VAL *(hurt)*. Very well, Grundy. I'll leave you to your thinking.

[She rises.]

GRUNDY *(contrite)*. Ah, now, honey, I didn't mean . . .

VAL. It's all right. *(She smiles a little.)* Try to get some rest. *(Starts to go, turns back.)* If you can spare the time between thoughts.

[Exits. Grundy sits up on sofa. Puts his head in his hands.]

GRUNDY *(muttering)*. I don't know which end I'm on — damned if I do.

FLAVIA *(appearing in the doorway)*. Has she gone?

GRUNDY *(starting up)*. You again!

FLAVIA. If you'd rather I went away . . .

[She makes a move to leave.]

GRUNDY *(hastily)*. NO! No, don't do that. You've caused me enough trouble without going off and leaving me in a state like this.

FLAVIA *(coming into the room)*. Trouble? I'm so sorry. I never intend to be troublesome. I actually came here to do you a favor.

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST

GRUNDY. Who are you? What's your name?

FLAVIA. Name?

[*She comes down to fireplace.*]

GRUNDY. You must be *someone*! You can't be merely the horrible result of too much K.P. duty!

FLAVIA. You might call me a Figment of your Imagination.

GRUNDY (*trying to be gay*). That's too long. What do your friends call you?

FLAVIA. I've an unusual name, but it's quite pretty, I think. I'm Flavia Collinge. It's a name that strikes a faint tinkling of little bells in one's head, don't you think?

[*She sits in chair right.*]

GRUNDY. The bells were tinkling before you told me your name, baby!

FLAVIA (*shuddering daintily*). Oh, heaven. Don't call me that; it's so vulgar!

GRUNDY. I want to touch you.

[*He rises, makes a move toward her.*]

FLAVIA (*starting up, backing against fireplace*). You mustn't! Really you mustn't. If you try, I'm afraid I shall have to leave again, and that mustn't happen. I came here with a purpose, and I mustn't leave until I've accomplished it.

GRUNDY. Oh, you're one of those purposeful ghosts. I've heard about your kind.

FLAVIA. I'm really not any different from the rest of them. Most of us have some kind of objective. For instance, the objective of most ghosts is to haunt houses.

GRUNDY. How cozy!

FLAVIA. Please don't be flippant. I couldn't bear any more of your flippancy. The way you were acting with your sister — it made me sick. She's pretty silly, I grant you, but it pleased her to try and make you happy. You're her brother and a soldier.

GRUNDY. She's always thought I was a little tin God.

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST

FLAVIA. Don't interrupt me. Like the general run of ghosts, I'm very easily annoyed.

GRUNDY (*abashed*). Sorry, Flavia.

FLAVIA. That's much better. I like you when you're humble. You aren't very often, are you?

GRUNDY (*grinning*). You must have been around when I was showing Val and Lou Ann my chest expansion.

FLAVIA. Yes, tough guy.

GRUNDY (*surprised*). You don't think I'm so tough?

FLAVIA. I admire your spirit — I admire your fervor, we'll say. A very fine, strong, military fervor, only you aren't really strong at all.

GRUNDY. Oh, yeah? I'm a damned good soldier, and I'd like you to make something of it. Want to listen to my heart beat?

FLAVIA (*quietly*). Your heart doesn't beat, soldier; it marches.

GRUNDY. Miss Flavia Collinge, I've suddenly decided I don't want to be haunted by you or anybody else. So get out of here.

FLAVIA (*lightly*). If there's anything I can't stand, it's the flaccidity of men. You're like most of them. You like to think you're invincible. You're under the impression that boot camp shot you above the grammar school of simple emotions.

GRUNDY. Get out of here.

[*He turns his back on her.*]

FLAVIA. I hate strong men, Private McKay, when they're really weak — like you. How long have you and Val been married?

GRUNDY (*crossing to her, threateningly*). A year! Are you going to . . .

FLAVIA. Stop! (*He stops.*) I hate to think what would happen if you touched me. I'm not tangible, you know. I sometimes wish I were.

GRUNDY (*roughly*). What's your game? What do you want me to do?

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST

FLAVIA (*urgently*). Tell her. Tell her you're going away in less than a week. Tell her you may never see her again.

GRUNDY (*turning away*). That's easy for you to say.

FLAVIA (*going to him*). Listen, I know what I'm talking about. I had a man once. Tell her!

GRUNDY. I can't — I can't!

[*He sits on sofa.*]

FLAVIA. I think she resents being protected. That's how it's always been. First her parents — they walked ahead of her in life, carefully weeding her little world; cooking the raw meat before she could taste the blood. Then they handed her over to you, Sir Galahad McKay with the fifty inch chest!

GRUNDY (*rising, enraged*). Shut up about my chest!

FLAVIA. They gave her to you to protect, and you've done your job well. You're still doing it. Don't you think you're doing it *too* well? You're being fine and noble, so she'll never know when you leave, and she'll never know when to expect you home again. That's going to be tough — hard for her to take!

GRUNDY (*pacing*). I can't tell her! She'll worry — she'll go wild with worry! I've *got* to leave her like this, with a laugh and a hug and a thousand kisses and the promise that I'll come back.

FLAVIA (*intensely*). All her life she's needed someone to protect *her*. Now *she* needs to protect someone, and that someone is *you*, Private McKay. She loves you, and she wants you to need her more than she's ever wanted anything in her life. You're so afraid you're shaking, McKay. You dread what's waiting for you over there. And it's waiting all right! God, it sits out there like a sentry, waiting, waiting for you!

GRUNDY (*choking*). Shut up!

FLAVIA. Are you going to tell her, or aren't you, McKay?

GRUNDY (*shouting fiercely*). I'll sit tight and be one of your flaccid mankind. That suits me better!

PRIVATE MCKAY'S GHOST

FLAVIA (*driving*). Stubborn, aren't you? Afraid to cry in front of your wife. Even though you need to, and she needs you to. I've wasted a lot of time on you!

GRUNDY. Then you can stop wasting it and go away!

FLAVIA (*relentlessly*). First, I'll give you a few tips on how to do it, since you insist on handling things your way. You know before Jerry went, he grabbed me in a big bear hug and said "Honey doll, when you see a falling star, remember Jerry up there with his little bow and arrow — and catch that star!" Those were his last words. Poignant, aren't they? Jerry had a big chest, too. He was big and strong and the bravest man you ever saw, Private McKay. (*Bitterly.*) Well, that's what I remember of Jerry with both of us being so strong and noble — and casual. I don't think he ever admitted his terror until he got up there in the sky and the thunder began. Then it hit him, all the little things he should have said and how he *needed* me those last few minutes!

GRUNDY (*screaming*). *Get out! Get out!*

FLAVIA. All right, I'll go. You handle it your way, Private McKay. Go ahead. (*She gets as far as door; turns.*) But God, how I pity you when the thunder begins.

[*She exits. Grundy stands, white. Then he sinks in chair, head in hands. There is a slight pause. Lou Ann enters quietly.*]

LOU ANN. Grundy, are you — are you all right?

GRUNDY. Eh? (*He sees who it is.*) Yes, yes, I'm all right.

LOU ANN. I heard you yelling. I wondered what was the matter.

GRUNDY. Nothing. I'm — I'm just trying to think — to think. There was something in the papers, something about a suicide — in the papers about a month ago — if I could only remember . . .

LOU ANN (*after a second*). Was it the Collinge woman,

PRIVATE McKAY'S GHOST

Flavia Collinge? She committed suicide a while ago, and all because her husband was killed.

GRUNDY (*on his feet in a second, white and shaking*). LOU ANN!

LOU ANN (*startled*). Yes, Grundy, what is it?

GRUNDY. Nothing — nothing — My God. (*He pulls himself together with some difficulty.*) Where's — where's Val?

LOU ANN. In the garden. She's . . .

[*She catches herself and stops.*]

GRUNDY (*quickly*). She's what?

LOU ANN (*reluctantly*). She's — she's crying, if you want to know.

[*Grundy stands still for a long moment. Then he turns and goes quickly through the center doors into the garden, to find Val.*]

Curtain



**PAPA NEVER DONE NOTHING . . .
MUCH**

**By
E. P. CONKLE**

CAST

MRS. DEWBERRY

MISS NASH

TIME. Just any.

PLACE. Texas, maybe.

PAPA NEVER DONE NOTHING . . . MUCH

It is the Dewberry's front room.

At the rise of the curtain no one is seen, but we hear a baby's cry in another room. Then a door-bell rings.

As we wait for someone to answer the bell, we notice a man's picture on the mantel. It's in a silver frame.

Then Mrs. Dewberry, a middle-aged housewife in an apron, comes into the room carrying a coffee-service, which she sets on the coffee table. Before she can put it down and get over to the door, the bell rings again.

Mrs. Dewberry opens the door; lets in Miss Nash, a trim young lady with a notebook in one hand. The baby stops crying.

MISS NASH. Is this Mrs. Lydia Dewberry?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Yes, this's me, all righty. Is that you?

MISS NASH. Why, yes. (*Smiling.*) I'm Beatrice Nash.

As I told you on the phone I represent the Dallas "News."

MRS. DEWBERRY. I've seen the "News," but I don't never read no out-of-town papers. Won't you . . . set?

MISS NASH (*sitting*). Thank you. I'm in a bit of a hurry.

(Mrs. Dewberry sits stiffly, starts to pour the coffee.)

Of course I'm sorry to hear of Mr. Dewberry's demise.

MRS. DEWBERRY (*stops pouring; goes blank; then smiles*).

Oh. You mean his death! Oh, yessy, quite! We're all sorry, of course.

MISS NASH (*opening her notebook*). What did Mr. Dewberry do for a living, Mrs. Dewberry?

MRS. DEWBERRY (*after a pause, occupied in deep thought as she hands Miss Nash a cup of coffee*). Well — Papa never done nothing . . . much. But when he did do, he done clerking at the American Bank, corner of Fifth and Fourth.

PAPA NEVER DONE . . . MUCH

MISS NASH (*supping; trying to make an entry in her notebook*). A — bank clerk?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Yes. (*A little less stiff; warming up a bit.*) He was due to be raised to head clerk the day after he died.

MISS NASH. How sad!

MRS. DEWBERRY. Yes. Papa was there forty years and looked forward to bein' head bank-clerk . . . which he never was, a-course.

MISS NASH. Well! Head (*Writing.*) bank clerk. I (*Lifting her head.*) understand Mr. Dewberry was a head man in the church, too. Sort of a pillar.

MRS. DEWBERRY. Papa was quite a big pillar in the church. He was an elder. The deacons used to call Papa (*She laughs self-consciously.*) their elderberry pillar! His name was Dewberry, you know. Elderberry — Dewberry.

MISS NASH (*trying to laugh*). Yes, I see! Quaint, wasn't it?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Quite! Papa was always givin' to the church. He also always sung bass at all the funerals, and collected the collection for his sunday school class. They give Papa a gold-plated pin for him doing that for twenty-five years handrunning. That pin wore four years before it started tarnishing!

MISS NASH. Well, now!

MRS. DEWBERRY. Papa was awful good at "we *thank* thee" prayers, but not so good a "we *ask* thee," ones. He . . .

MISS NASH. I (*Breaking in, a bit firmly.*) I hear Mr. Dewberry left his family well-fixed when he died. Could you tell me, did he invest . . .

MRS. DEWBERRY (*correcting and reprovingly*). Papa always wouldn't never let us say anything about dying. Papa never really died.

MISS NASH. What did he do, then?

MRS. DEWBERRY. He always said he was just going to "take his way thitherward." That's all.

PAPA NEVER DONE . . . MUCH

MISS NASH. That's — all? He just "took his way thitherward"!

MRS. DEWBERRY. Yes. (*Loud; drinking her coffee.*) And Papa left us fairly well fixed. Though, of course, he never done nothing, much. All the children gets twenty dollars a month, and me fifty-two. And Papa built us this house, a-course. Fourteen rooms that Papa planned and built all alone by hisself with an old hammer and saw, except when he needed Sam Amboy to help him lift the furnace.

MISS NASH (*warily*). And — Papa never did anything?

MRS. DEWBERRY (*not catching on*). Well, not nothing much a person would ever notice. That chair you're setting in . . .

MISS NASH. A genuine Chippendale, isn't it?

MRS. DEWBERRY. A genu-ine Dewberry! Papa built it and upholstered it. That'n over there, too. And that'n. Papa built *all* the chairs in the house to set on.

MISS NASH. He — did — *what*?

MRS. DEWBERRY (*shrugging; offhandedly*). Oh, yes. Papa built *all* the funnyture.

MISS NASH. Don't tell me that! You mean — all of it in this room?

MRS. DEWBERRY (*nodding; then adding*). *All* the funnyture in *all* the rooms.

MISS NASH (*putting her coffee cup down*). In all *twelve*?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Fourteen, counting the two lawn-sets. (*Miss Nash scribbles in her notebook hurriedly. Mrs. Dewberry goes on unconcernedly.*) Papa started life poor, which is a serious handicap for anybody, and about which there ain't much to write. And he never got no higher than a bank-clerk. But he was a *good* man, though he never had no schoolin' to speak of, neither.

MISS NASH (*scanning the book-cases*). I take it Mr. Dewberry was very well educated, anyway, from the books he had collected and, probably — *read*? He (*A bit anx-*

PAPA NEVER DONE . . . MUCH

ious not to be disappointed.) did read them all, didn't he?

MRS. DEWBERRY (*shaking her head sadly*). No . . .

MISS NASH (*very greatly disappointed*). I'm so sorry to hear that . . .

MRS. DEWBERRY (*going on*). Papa only *wrote* them.

MISS NASH (*amazed; eyeing the cases*). "Only *wrote* them?"

MRS. DEWBERRY. Yes. (*Matter-of-fact.*) Them's all Papa's Collected Works, as he called them. In his own handwriting. (*Miss Nash rises; goes to examine the cases in awe.*) They's books of Papa's poems, essays, plays, nursery rhymes, history, mathematics, diet, philosophy, and a special study there on the end, on *tomtits*.

MISS NASH (*examining the shelves*). Tomtits!

MRS. DEWBERRY. Yes. "Tomtits, their Reason; by Dewey D. Dewberry."

MISS NASH. Oh, yes, here it is.

MRS. DEWBERRY (*going over to a special case in a corner*).

And over here's Papa's stamp collections. These's only his *special* ones. (*She opens the case revealing piles of stamp albums.*) They's only twenty-four of *them*.

MISS NASH. Is *that* all? I declare . . .

MRS. DEWBERRY (*getting out one album; opening it*).

Papa pasted in big bushel-bags of stamps from all of them far-off places like Guatamala, Baluchistan, Ifni; some closter to home, like some Browning's Green Trading Stamps; and a few bicarbonate of soda pictures around the edges for decoration. Then, there's (*Getting out another book.*) also ten big books of match-book covers, if you want to see them and put them in your notes, and sixteen more books all about table-tennis players — with an *index*. And many others in the garage.

MISS NASH (*jotting down something; amazed still*). And Papa collected all these when — he wasn't doing — nothing?

PAPA NEVER DONE . . . MUCH

MRS. DEWBERRY (*nonchalantly*). Oh, yessy! And here's twelve books of bran *new* stamps Papa designed hisself and printed on th' stamp machine he made in the cellar. Papa was artistic, that-a-way.

MISS NASH (*dropping back into her chair*). Indeed!

MRS. DEWBERRY. He also done two hundred-forty oil paintings on barrel-heads which we got in the attic. One is all about "Moses amongst the Bullrushes," only Papa called hisn "Moses amongst the Rushing Bulls." They's Herefords, Holsteins, Jerseys, and a muley old polled Angus. *I'm bendin' (Proudly bending.)* over Moses, and Papa hisself is bent over a stump overlookin' us, smiling!

MISS NASH. I daresay it must be a fearful and wonderful picture!

MRS. DEWBERRY. Well, they's a lot-a good paint went into it!

MISS NASH (*poising her pencil*). Is there anything Pa . . . Mr. Dewberry *did not* set his mind and hand to, Mrs. Dewberry?

MRS. DEWBERRY. My, oh, me, yes! Papa never did seem to do nothing, much . . . but one thing he didn't do was not to build him a submarine.

MISS NASH (*ready to faint*). No! Not a — submarine! You mean, on a barrel-head?

MRS. DEWBERRY (*shaking her head*). No, I mean out in our cob-house! Papa worked on it for ye-ars. Old Ford engines, and pipe-ranches, and warsh-boilers, and even two dozens of my kid-curlers! And when Papa got it all done, he had a big celebration. People come from all sides to see it. But Papa couldn't git it out of the cob-shed! (*Pause.*) And do you know what him and everybody lit in and done?

MISS NASH (*a mere guess*). I suppose him and them all lit in and tore the cob-shed *down*!

MRS. DEWBERRY (*taken back that Miss Nash should have guessed*). Well, yes (*Gleefully.*) they *did*! (*Miss*

PAPA NEVER DONE . . . MUCH

Nash sighs contentedly.) They all lit in and tore that shed right down, drug the appyratus that looked like a big, sad, sun-het wartermelon, down to the lake. And do you know what it up and went and done on poor Papa?

MISS NASH. I'd rather not guess again.

MRS. DEWBERRY. Well, it up and went and — *sunk!*

MISS NASH. How dreadful!

MRS. DEWBERRY. But the worst was how they ruined Papa's garden gettin' it out of the cob-shed!

MISS NASH. Papa gardened, too?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Papa was an arduous gardenér, both flower, harb, and vegetable, including eggplant crossed with spinach. Papa also had some dahlias there, and coffee.

MISS NASH. He couldn't raise coffee, Mrs. Dewberry!

MRS. DEWBERRY (*prim; certain*). Well, *he did*, Miss Nash! (*Nodding more certain; a bit of triumph.*) You're drinking some of Papa's coffee right now! It's good, ain't it?

MISS NASH. Why, yes. (*Having to admit it.*) It's really good!

MRS. DEWBERRY. A-course, it is! Papa was good, too, though he never . . .

MISS NASH. . . . done nothing . . .

MRS. DEWBERRY. . . . *much*. Yes, he raised all our own coffee in a cold-frame. He roasted and ground it hisself — whole, coarse, percolator, or drip.

MISS NASH. Even *drip*?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Even drip, also. And Papa was never more than ten miles from here since he was born. Papa never *learned how* to raise coffee. He just *done* it. Started the year he married me and he was seventeen and me thirteen. Four years difference, a-course.

MISS NASH. Seventeen — thirteen — four. That's right. You were married a bit young, both of you, weren't you?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Not for Papa. He allus b'lieved in

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starting ahead-a time when he was going some place, and he never liked to go no place he'd never been to before. That's why I had a time gittin' Papa married to me.
[*Miss Nash smiles.*]

MISS NASH (*taking her notebook again*). Would you say that Mr. Dewberry had any shortcomings, Mrs. Dewberry?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Well, he had one.

MISS NASH (*leaning forward; pencil poised*). No-o!

MRS. DEWBERRY. Yes-s! (*Low.*) Papa smoked a black cigar every Sunday evening — back of the tool-shed, of course — by hisself.

MISS NASH (*shocked*). A whole black cigar?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Just a portion of a whole black cigar. One cigar had to last Papa all year. And he sure enjoyed the stars out there even if he couldn't hardly only taste of the cigar. He used to say on one night he counted 4276 bright stars, 2541 dim stars, 2172 in betwixt, as well as the moon, and the tail-end of a comet disappearing!

MISS NASH. Do tell!

[*She scribbles in her book.*]

MRS. DEWBERRY (*shaking her head*). Yes, sireee, I do tell! What Papa told. (*Sound of the baby squawling.*) The childern allus loved Papa, too! He used to build all their little toys. We got three trunksful of paper dollies Papa cut out for them. Also scads-a dresses and other clothes he made for them. Papa would git up and dress the little ones every morning before he brung me in my breakfast!

MISS NASH. "Dress the little ones." (*Writing, with a smile.*) How many children did you and Mr. Dewberry have?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Ah (*Thinking.*) let me see (*She counts on her fingers.*) one — two — three . . . (*Pause.*) We finally had only — fifteen. (*Miss Nash cries out; strikes*

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her forehead.) And Abby was born just the day before Papa passed away. That's Abby (*Baby squawls.*) now.

MISS NASH. Sixteen, then?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Fifteen and Abby makes sixteen, if you can call Abby one, she's so little yet!

MISS NASH (*getting up*). And you *still* say Papa never done nothing . . . much?

MRS. DEWBERRY (*shrugging*). Not that a person could hardly tell!

[*Miss Nash fixes her hat to leave.*]

MISS NASH. Do you think of anything Papa did that *you* like to think of as a bit unusual before he "took his way thitherward"?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Well, no. Only he built his own castick out of the old out-house when we put the bathrooms in the house. He lined it with one-a my old purple silk suits so's (*A sentimental smile.*) he, as he said, could rest on my buzzom even in eternity! Papa was sentimental that-a-way. A-course, the castick is in the basement now.

MISS NASH (*remembering*). That's — right! (*Thinking.*) Let me see . . . just how did Mr. Dewberry come to lose his life, now?

MRS. DEWBERRY. He never *come* to lose it a-tall; he *went*. Out in the cow-parsture. (*Pause.*) Papa was trying-out a new explositive dynamite he fixed and mixed up. Some says Papa was too confident. Some says he was too clost. *I* says Papa was just built too leisure to run. (*Silence, as Miss Nash puts her notebook away.*) Papa was like that. In all his life I never seen Papa light in and just — *run*!

MISS NASH. Well, well! (*As she points to the picture on the mantelpiece.*) I take it that that is Papa's last picture up there?

MRS. DEWBERRY. Oh, no, no! (*Beaming and fluttering.*) That's Mr. Lillydoo's up there — now.

PAPA NEVER DONE . . . MUCH

MISS NASH (*turning; interested*). Mr. Lillydoo's? Who's Mr. Lillydoo?

MRS. DEWBERRY (*nonchalantly; highly pleased*). Oh, he's the gent Papa picked out for me next if he ever passed on first — which he done, of course!

MISS NASH (*dizzy; gasping*). "The gent Papa picked out next — if he . . ." And you *still* say Papa never done nothing . . . much?

MRS. DEWBERRY (*at the picture; smiling fondly on it*). *Not like Mr. Lillydoo does!*

[*Miss Nash yells; rushes out. Mrs. Dewberry doesn't notice. She keeps on smiling as she shoves Papa's stamp-books off into the waste-basket, eyes on Mr. Lillydoo.*]

Curtain

SORORITY SISTERS
By
BETTY ANN MATTINGLEY

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CAST

BESS

GUSSY

VEE

MARGE

POLLY

MRS. RINEHART

EXTRAS (*at least two girls*)

TIME. The present.

PLACE. A bedroom in a small sorority house.

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The scene is a bedroom in a small sorority house near the campus of almost any co-ed university. The room so plainly shows the opposing temperaments of its two occupants that there is a feeling of lack of space.

Partially in order to achieve this appearance and also in order to pull the few pieces of furniture downstage, the set is built in the shape of an inverted "V" heading into a door which opens into a hallway. The furniture is all of inexpensive wooden construction, and shows the wear of other college generations.

Just down right from the door is a slatted bookcase, which leans to one side from the strain of the many textbooks and oddments piled hit-and-miss into it. A double-decker bed occupies the center of the right wall. The neatly-made lower half of the bed is covered with a brown tailored monk's-cloth spread, trimmed with a green border. The upper bed has been pulled into "shape" by one or two careless jerks, which have left the sheet hanging below the extremely feminine but equally wrinkled pink ruffled bed spread. Below the bed is a study table — the only uncluttered object in the room. It suggests disuse rather than neatness. There is an undisturbed film of dust upon the surface; the fancy desk set is placed precisely but without consideration for ease of use, and the chair before the desk is pushed flat against the table edge. The chair has a slip cover on the back and a matching seat cushion — again of an impractical pink. Two brightly impersonal prints hang above the desk, and an empty and wonderfully feminine wastebasket is down from it.

Down left from the door is a dresser large enough to hold the belongings of both girls. Its surface is filled to overflowing with paraphernalia designed to improve upon na-

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ture: — perfumes in elaborate atomizers, bath salts and powder, make-up in general, an expensive comb and brush set. There is also a man-sized ash tray and an opened package of cigarettes on the dresser, and on each side of it is a lamp with a pink ruffled shade which succeeds in cutting off most of the light. The doors to the two closets are down left from the dresser. Just down from the closets is a large too-pink, chintz-covered bedroom chair. A study table down left corresponds with the one on the right in position, but in no other respect. It is reasonably neat, but shows its constant use; several books are lined between strictly utilitarian book ends at the back, other books are in stacks on the sides, an opened notebook is near the center, a gooseneck lamp is in the upper left corner, and a bottle of ink, pencils, eraser, ash tray, are scattered over the top. A jammed-full wastebasket is down from the desk. Needless to say, there are no pink bows on the basket, and it very probably came from the dime store.

The upstage closet door is wide open, showing something of a jumble within. The shoe bag, which should hang from hooks on the inside of the closet door, has fallen down, and allowed several pairs of shoes to tumble out into the room. A notebook and some other books have been tossed in the general direction of the lower bed, and one of the books has slipped to the floor. A light spring coat almost hides the bedroom chair from sight, and a box of powder has been knocked off the dresser and has rolled into the middle of the room, leaving its trail. The door to the hall is open, and remains so except where specifically mentioned.

It is one minute after dinner, Friday evening.

There is the noise of voices as the girls come up the stairs from dinner and scatter into their rooms. Two or three girls walk right past the half-opened door, and then Bess and Gussy enter from the left. Bess is twenty-one and a senior, and Gussy the same age and a junior.

Bess is strictly business: her energetic walk, her crisp, short, red hair, her quiet sports clothes, her clipped brusque

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speech. She is so honest with herself that she is unable to understand affectation in others. Gussy has the same deepset honesty, but her background has given her a more liberal attitude. She is a tall, only moderately attractive girl, who is well-liked.

Bess comes down right and leans against the bed, surveying the room in a pose of exaggerated disgust.

BESS. Gussy, I'd like you to meet my roommate, Miss Mess-It-Up.

[Waves hand toward room in general.]

GUSSY (*coming down left and starting to pick up shoes*).

Bear up, Bess, old gal; she can't go on like this much longer or things'll be up to the ceiling.

BESS (*picking up powder box with an ill-humored swipe*).

No? She's had eighteen years to practice in, so why should she give up now?

[Places box on dresser, and looks with disgust at powder on floor.]

GUSSY. Don't you give up, either! (*Stops and looks intently at Bess, who is picking up books from bed and placing them on bookcase.*) I'm serious, Bess. I think Vee's all right underneath; I think she'll be a fine person some day.

BESS. You know what I think? (*Gussy shakes her head with a grin.*) Nobody could be "fine" who can live in a pink room!

[Indicates room and exits, turning right down hall. Gussy smiles in silent acknowledgment, then hangs up wraps and closes closet door. As she crosses to straighten the upper bed, Bess returns with a carpet sweeper, which she uses vigorously on the spilled powder.]

GUSSY. And you don't do so well in a rumpus room, I gather.

BESS (*with a final thrust of the sweeper*). Right! (*Stands sweeper just up from dresser, gets cigarette from dresser and lights it, then sits in bedroom chair.*) Honestly,

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since Vee had this cover made for my chair, I'm afraid to sit in it for fear the pink will rub off.

Gussy (*laughing*). Our little pink-bottomed Bess.

[*Completes bed-making, and sits on lower bed.*]

Bess (*serious*). Listen, Gussy, you're a psychologist . . .

Gussy (*interrupting*). Only in the making.

Bess. Anyway, a psych major ought to be able to tell what's wrong with Vee. She's not *all* wrong.

Gussy (*dryly*). At least *men* don't think so.

Bess. Oh, she's pretty enough. The only thing she needs is a whole new personality.

[*Reaches to study table for ash tray.*]

Gussy. You're not being quite fair, Bess. She's awfully different from you.

Bess (*interrupting fervently*). Thank God!

Gussy. She could be a pretty nice person — only she's kind of off the track somehow. She seems to lack security . . . hasn't enough faith in herself . . .

Bess (*sitting up in amazement*). Listen, you. If there's one thing Vee does have, outside of a passion for pink, it's self-confidence plus.

Gussy (*with a shrug*). Well, you asked for it . . .

Bess. Psychologists think they can settle anything by clocking it in like that. If a girl's shy it's an inferiority complex, and if she's cocky it's still the old inferiority complex. Wonderful what a few terms can cover! (*A light, sweet voice is heard humming a popular tune as the owner comes right down the hallway.*) And speaking of the devil!

[*Vee enters, carrying a collapsible ironing-board, which she sets up just down from the dresser. She is eighteen and a freshman. She is also small, blonde, and feminine enough to give any man a protective urge. She knows her power among men, but with her own sex her charm is somewhat uneducated. Her moods vary from too-bright smiles to sulky petulance.*]

VEE. Greetings, sisters!

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Gussy. Hello, Vee.

[Bess waves a disinterested hand.]

VEE. You know, I've got a swell idea. Next Monday at fraternity meeting, I say let's give Mrs. Rinehart a medal for meal-planning.

Gussy (*cocking her head to one side*). Do my old ears deceive me?

VEE. A medal for consistency. She hasn't had a decent meal since I pledged Beta Gamma.

BESS (*dryly*). Nobody that I know of ever died of monotony.

VEE. Maybe not, but I could live better on a little variety. Why, I can recite next month's menus right now.

[Dives into closet and comes out with an iron, which she plugs into an outlet just down from the dresser. She gets out a fussy ultra-feminine evening gown and returns to ironing-board, leaving closet door open.]

BESS (*mock admiration*). My, my — what marvelous brain cells you have.

VEE. Thanks!

BESS. Oh, it's just the biologist in me.

VEE (*sharply*). Yes, I know. All dissection, but you can't put frogs back together again, can you?

BESS (*with a grin*). I see you got as far as Mother Goose in school.

Gussy (*frowning*). Bess — Vee — stop it! You're room-mates and you've got to get along. You'll only be miserable otherwise. (*Coaxingly.*) Come on now . . .

BESS (*rather sheepishly*). I'm sorry, Vee. I guess I do kind of pick on you.

[Puts out cigarette and places ash tray on floor.]

VEE. Well, it's all right — I mean what you said, not the picking. (*Tests iron with a dry finger.*) Gee, but this iron is slow!

BESS (*motioning toward formal*). Going to the Union dance tonight?

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VEE. Uh-huh. (*With sly malice.*) Either one of you going?

BESS. No, dear. I've got a date with a frog.

GUSSY (*maintaining good humor*). I am. But I'm not going to wear a formal.

VEE. That's silly, Gussy. The men can see you any time in street clothes.

BESS. You won't catch little Vee missing a chance to take off some clothes at the top and put 'em on at the bottom.

GUSSY (*quickly*). Who's taking you, Vee?

[*Vee tests iron again, finds it hot enough, and begins to work on the dress. She presses it very carefully, but is inept to the point of hardly knowing which hand to hold the iron with.*]

BESS. Haven't you heard?

VEE (*sweetly*). Fred Mason.

GUSSY. Fred Mason! (*Gets up suddenly and hits head on upper deck.*) Ouch! Darn that thing, anyway. (*Rubs head as she speaks.*) I thought Polly still had his pin. Where've I been all these years?

[*Gets newspaper from bookcase and spreads it under ironing-board, where dress is dragging.*]

BESS (*succinctly*). Polly *did*. But she introduced him to Vee.

VEE. Oh, Polly's still got his *pin*, I think. I'm just sort of borrowing *him* for a while.

GUSSY (*whistling in amazement*). Nothing like a freshman stealing the house president's man!

BESS. She believes in starting at the top and working down.

VEE (*defiant*). Well, what's so awful about man-snatching?

GUSSY (*slowly*). I guess nothing criminal. I suppose we've all done a little of it.

BESS (*firmly*). But not from Polly Graham! People just don't snatch from girls as swell as Polly, that is, decent people.

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VEE. And why not, I'd like to know? She's got two hands and a head. If she wants her man, why doesn't she hang onto him?

BESS. Because she's always using those hands and that head to help somebody else, that's why! Something *you* wouldn't understand, my little pink china doll.

VEE (*petulantly*). Can I help it if I happen to like pink, and you happen to have red hair?

[*Gussy laughs, and after a moment Bess joins in.*]

BESS. And they *don't* go together, but that's no "happen-so." (*Rises and circles around ironing-board to dresser. Gets manicure set from drawer.*) Well, maybe I'd match my roommate better if I did my nails — *pink!*

[*While Bess is at the dresser, Gussy comes down and hovers over Bess's open notebook on the study table.*]

GUSSY. Bess, mind if I take a few sheets of paper?

BESS. What? (*Looking up.*) Oh, sure, help yourself.

GUSSY (*ripping out two or three sheets*). I might as well put my time to good use by writing the family the weekly scandal sheet. (*Crosses to Vee's study table.*) And can I use your table, Vee?

VEE (*with a smile*). Of course. It *needs* a little breaking in.

GUSSY (*blowing off the top layer of dust*). I see what you mean. (*Settles herself at desk and pulls out fountain-pen from pocket of jacket. Faces slightly down.*) What's the date?

[*A girl walks left past the door. This may be one of the previously-used extras but, if so, it is preferable that she wear a different sweater or have changed her appearance in some other way.*]

BESS. The twenty-fifth.

[*Goes down left, pulls bedroom chair down toward study table, and manicures nails, talking over her shoulder to the others, meanwhile. Gussy writes. The phone rings off, and all three girls stop work and listen. A distant voice*

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calls "Janet" and the girls relax. Gussy speaks after a second's pause.

Gussy (*with sincerity and no nastiness in her voice*). Vee, don't you like Polly?

[*Throughout the remainder of the play — up to the lift preceding the climax — Gussy alternately joins in the conversation and writes rather absently, with half her attention focused on the conflict within the room.*]

VEE. Of course. But what's that got to do with Fred Mason?

BESS. A mind like a pollywog!

VEE (*the martyr*). Bess, if you'd had to look out for yourself all your life like I've had to do, you'd soon learn it doesn't pay to let your liking for anyone interfere with getting what you want.

BESS (*scornfully*). Listen to the little gal who only had a few trillion dollars left her by a parent or two.

VEE (*sincere for the moment*). But I'd rather have had the parents . . .

Gussy. Vee, how long have your folks been dead?

VEE. Long enough so I don't even know what they looked like. (*Drifting off into her own thoughts.*) They say my mother was a beautiful woman, a blonde with eyes that were blue as anything. When I was born, Mother said I looked like her . . .

BESS. Oh, sure, you're a beautiful blonde, too.

VEE (*abruptly jerked back*). I didn't mean . . . oh, skip it.

[*A black-haired, dancing-eyed minx named Marge sticks her head around the door from the left. She is wearing a red housecoat and her shoulder-length hair is braided. She is twenty and a sophomore.*]

MARGE. Hi-ya, kittens! Anybody aching for a nice fast rubber of bridge?

VEE (*taking it out on Marge*). No, thank you, Marge dear. I'll leave the bridge for you stay-at-homes. I'm going to the dance.

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MARGE (*with a twinkle*). Hmmm . . . you got poison ivy again?

VEE. What?

MARGE. To match your disposition. (*Vee ignores the remark. Marge comes down and perches on lower bed, talking mostly to Bess and Gussy.*) Know what, I was going to the dance, too, but I broke my date just now. (*Mysteriously.*) There are rumors afloat, my dear sisters in the bond. Heard 'em yet?

GUSSY. What gives?

[*Bess stops her manicure to give full attention.*]

MARGE. Yep, big rumors . . . (*Impressively.*) We're going to have a man up here tonight.

[*She makes the impression. Even Vee forgets to iron.*]

GUSSY (*turns in chair and leans over back of it*). No kidding, Marge!

BESS. Good Lord, *whose* man? Who's doing the smuggling?

MARGE (*rising with satisfaction*). I dunno, kittens; I've given you my little all. (*Sees Vee's motionless iron upon the dress, and points.*) Say, Priceless, didn't anyone ever tell you that a hot iron plus prolonged contact equals the hole in the doughnut?

VEE (*angrily jerking up the iron*). No, nobody ever told me — for the very good reason that I never did things like this at home.

MARGE. Well, personally I come from a long line of ironers — and I'm telling you *now*. (*Strolls to door.*) So long, and let me know when you hear the male animal growling.

[*Exits left. Gussy returns to her letter.*]

BESS. Say, Vee, *you* aren't bringing in the man, are you?

VEE. Of *course* not.

BESS. It sounds about your speed.

VEE. If I wanted to break any house rules, I certainly wouldn't pick that one. I believe in taking the men *away* from the competition.

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BESS (*sarcastically*). I see your point. And what happens if the competition follows?

VEE. What're you getting at?

BESS. I mean just *this . . .* (*Slams bottle of nail polish down on table and rises.*) I'm going to see that Polly Graham does a little fighting on her own account for once.

VEE (*with a shrug of her shoulders*). Oh, if Polly wants Fred badly enough, she'll fight, I guess, but I doubt if it'll do much good.

BESS (*toward Gussy*). My God! Such an inferiority complex!

[*Gussy stops writing and turns in chair.*]

VEE. I wish you wouldn't swear so, Bess.

BESS (*sarcastically anxious to please*). And which do you prefer — odd's bodkins or dearie me?

VEE. It's just not ladylike.

BESS (*hands on hips*). And do you think what you're doing to Polly is ladylike?

GUSSY. Vee, Polly's sort of different. Don't you understand?

VEE (*shortly*). No!

GUSSY. Anybody else *would* fight back, but Polly's such a lovely dope I doubt if she even knows you're out on a snatching party.

BESS (*truculently*). She will after I get through telling her.

VEE (*tauntingly*). Belligerent Bess, how we love her!

BESS. Let's leave me out of it and talk about Polly.

(*Trying to calm down and reason with her.*) Vee, doesn't the fact that Polly is your sorority mother mean anything to you?

VEE. Sure, that she's my sorority mother!

[*Bess throws in the sponge.*]

GUSSY. But there's supposed to be an extra-special tie between mother and daughter . . .

VEE. *Supposed to be.* (*Sets down iron with a bang.*)

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Listen. I don't have any extra-special tie with *anybody*. See?

[*Pause.*]

Gussy. Vee, why did you join Beta Gam?

VEE (*shrugging*). And just *why* should I tell you?

BESS (*acidly*). My guess would be because you knew you couldn't crash a *big* sorority.

VEE (*stung*). My mother was a Beta Gamma and her mother, too . . . (*Angry at herself now for revealing so much.*) Oh, all *right*. For all you know, maybe I joined to get the lowdown, so I could do some blackmailing.

Gussy (*grinning*). You know — you got something there!

BESS (*returning to her manicure*). And the best chapter would be autobiographical.

[*There is a light tap on the door as Polly enters from the left. She is a quiet, self-possessed girl, whose very calmness somehow dominates. She is a twenty-two-year-old senior.*]

POLLY. Hello, girls.

[*Vee smiles at Polly.*]

Gussy. Hello, sweetness and light.

BESS. Yeah, Polly, come on in and set a spell, as my Grandma O'Hearn would say.

POLLY. Thank you, Bess, but I can't stay. I really came to see Vee. (*Turns to Vee.*) Could you come down to my room later, dear (*With a gesture toward the "formal."*) when you've finished? I'd like to show you the basic designs I've worked out for your place-cards.

BESS (*sharply*). I thought *you* were chairman of the dinner-dance committee, Vee.

POLLY. Oh, Vee *is* chairman and she's doing a grand job, too, but she didn't have quite the art training to carry through her idea.

BESS. Hmmm . . .

POLLY (*to Vee again*). Do you have time to work on them tonight, Vee?

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VEE. I'm sorry, Polly, really. But I'm going to the Union dance and so . . .

POLLY (*without any emphasis one way or the other*). With Fred Mason?

[*Gussy and Bess are unable to understand her quiet acceptance.*]

VEE (*with a chip on her shoulder*). Yes, I am. (*When Polly makes no response, Vee knocks the chip off.*) Well, aren't you going to say anything?

POLLY (*considering it for a moment*). No — no, I don't think so. (*With a smile.*) I'm a woman of action, my dear, not words.

GUSSY (*also quietly*). And if I'm not mistaken, you've already acted, Polly. (*Points.*) Where's Fred's pin?

BESS. My God, Polly! (*Jumps up again and crosses to Polly, shaking her lightly.*) Are you going to let that little chit do you out of Fred?

POLLY (*disengaging herself and leading Bess back to her much-interrupted manicure*). Now stop worrying, Bess. It's all been settled and . . . (*A plaintive voice is heard calling off "Pol-ly, oh Pol-ly!" Polly breaks off her speech and calls as she goes to the door.*) Here I am, Mrs. Rinehart, in Bess and Vee's room.

[*Mrs. Rinehart bustles in from the left and puts a loving arm around Polly, carrying her down in front of the bed by the sweep and force of her entrance. Mrs. Rinehart, the house chaperone, is a woman of about fifty-five, who is well preserved. Bess and Gussy rise courteously.*]

MRS. RINEHART (*to Polly*). Oh, here you are, my dear. I've been looking simply everywhere for you. (*Shaking a playful finger.*) You mustn't hide so well next time.

POLLY (*sincerely. Throughout the scene she is considerate of Mrs. Rinehart's feelings*). I'm sorry, Mrs. Rinehart.

MRS. RINEHART (*suddenly aware of Bess and Gussy*). Oh, do sit down, girls.

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BESS (*pushing bedroom chair back into place*). Won't you sit here, Mrs. Rinehart?

MRS. RINEHART. No thank you, Bess. I can't stay this time. (*Bess relaxes.*) I only came to tell you about the man . . .

GUSSY. Yes? }
BESS. What man? } (*Together.*)

MRS. RINEHART (*turning suddenly to Polly*). Oh, that reminds me, Polly darling. I saw your Fred in the play last night and he was wonderful, just simply wonderful.

POLLY. I'm glad you enjoyed the play.

MRS. RINEHART (*with growing enthusiasm*). Oh, "The Merry Wives of Windsor" is just a little gem, I always say. And last night Shakespeare and Fred were both at their very best. Fred made a perfect Flagstaff, just simply perfect.

POLLY. What? Oh, yes, of course, Flagstaff.

[*Others find it difficult to suppress their laughter.*]

MRS. RINEHART. I especially liked the scene where they carried him off in the basket. Fred's such a wonderful actor you could almost feel him acting, right through the basket!

POLLY. I'll tell Fred how much you liked him in the role.

MRS. RINEHART. Oh, never mind, dear; I went backstage last night and told him myself. Oh, and he sent you a message, Polly dear . . . (*Stops in bewilderment for a moment.*) Or was it Vee he said? (*Gives up trying to decipher her memories.*) Anyway, he said to tell somebody he was sending pink roses tonight.

POLLY (*without sarcasm*). Thank you, Mrs. Rinehart, for telling — us.

MRS. RINEHART (*brightly; turns to leave*). Oh, it wasn't a bit of trouble. Well, have a good time tonight, everyone.

BESS. Mrs. Rinehart, you said something about a man . . .

MRS. RINEHART (*shaking her head with mild irritation*).

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Why, of course, how stupid of me to forget! I just wanted to warn you to stay away from the, the — room down at the end of the hall. (*Gestures right.*) The plumber is going to fix that leak tonight.

GUSSY (*completely let down*). A plumber!

MRS. RINEHART. Yes, isn't it disgusting? I don't see why he couldn't have come this morning when I called him, but then (*Shrugging her shoulders.*) one just can't argue with plumbers. (*Completing her exit with a coy wave of a lace handkerchief. She goes into the hallway.*) Good night, girls!

BESS (*sinking into chair*). And biology teaches us all women belong to the same species!

[*A girl — one of the original extras, if desired — goes right, past the door. She is wearing a housecoat, and carrying a towel and soap dish. Her hair is pinned on top of her head in preparation for a shower.*]

POLLY. We shouldn't make fun of her, girls. She doesn't realize . . . (*Her lips curl into a smile as she remembers.*) But Flagstaff!

GUSSY. Yes, and from her favorite Shakespeare, too.

[*Half leans, half sits on study table.*]

POLLY. I'd better go help her or she'll forget someone.

[*Exits down hall.*]

VEE (*setting iron down with air of finality*). Well, there! That's done after so long a time. (*Takes dress off board and comes down center holding it up for inspection. Speaks a little uncertainly.*) Do you think it looks all right?

BESS. Oh, sure, lambie-pie. Fred won't be looking at your dress.

GUSSY. You really did a professional job, Vee. I'm proud of you!

VEE (*suspicious that she is being razzed.*) Yeah, I can just see that!

[*Marge pops in again from the left, with the same twinkle but a mockingly dolorous expression. Vee begins to put*

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the "formal" on a hanger, bend top of hanger and put it over top of closet door, fold up ironing-board and put it with carpet sweeper, and put iron away.

MARGE (*meanwhile*). Know what, kittens? Heard the tragic news?

GUSSY. Can't you get a dummy for the bridge game?

[Bess completes manicure and begins to put bottles back in case.]

MARGE (*brushing aside such frivolity*). The man . . . turned out to be a plumber.

BESS. Yeah, a pick-me-up then let-me-down. Gosh, we haven't had a man on third floor since I was a freshman.

VEE (*interestedly*). What's this, Bess?

BESS. No, you don't, my fine-feathered freshman. I'm not supplying any blackmailing material.

VEE. Oh, all this silly talk just about a *man*. You all sound like you'd never seen one.

MARGE. But it's not just *this* man; it's the one I broke the date with. My, my! Just to think . . .

GUSSY. Did you *really* break a date, Marge?

MARGE. I certainly did. (*Drawing herself up with mock dignity.*) I'll have you know I'm in bed with malaria, at least.

GUSSY (*grinning*). That's just too, *too* bad.

VEE (*viciously*). She probably *will* be sick now. Dates don't come often enough in Marge's life for her to break 'em like that.

MARGE (*not easily insulted*). Oh, I wouldn't waste too much sympathy on me, chickadee. It was a blind date, and from what I hear the guy's also deaf and dumb. 'Bye now!

[Exits left with a wink at Gussy.]

GUSSY. Sometimes I wonder if Marge herself knows when she's serious and when she's kidding.

[Goes and sits on lower bed.]

BESS. What I'd like to know is what she does in a classroom.

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[*Mrs. Rinehart and the girl who was going to take a shower go left past the door. Mrs. Rinehart is gesturing busily, undoubtedly elaborating on the dire consequences of being caught in a shower by a plumber — and the girl is nodding a sulky agreement. Polly follows them in just a moment.*

VEE. From the grades she makes . . . darned little.

BESS. You're a fine one to talk. You haven't cracked a book since the day you got your pin and went off study table.

VEE. Oh, don't worry about me, dear. I'll burn both ends of the candle when the time comes. (*Comes down and looks at Bess's nails.*) That's a nice shade you've got there. Mind if I use it?

BESS (*dumping the manicure set into Vee's arms*). Not at all. It's very appropriate; the name's *Vixen*!

VEE (*not to be insulted out of it*). Thanks, dear.

[*Sits in the same position as Bess, to do nails. Bess wanders, full of only partially suppressed anger and excitement.*

Gussy. Sit down, Bess. You're making *me* nervous.

VEE (*to Bess*). What's the matter, dear? Feeling like a caged lioness again?

BESS (*still lionessing*). It's the craziest thing about Polly. When you're with her, she makes you feel like she can handle anything. But the minute you get away from her you know darned well she can't take any better care of herself than a baby.

[*Gets a cigarette and tamps it so hard that she knocks it from her hand onto the dresser. Finally gets it lighted, and smokes with nervous irritation.*

Gussy. You mean she *won't*.

VEE. Can't or won't, it all seems awfully silly to me. It's plain as anything that if a woman wants her man she can keep him. And if she doesn't want him bad enough to try . . . (*Shrugs.*) well, so what's all the furore about?

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BESS (*murderously*). Listen, you pretty little ball of fluff, obviously *you* don't even know how to spell the word "loyalty," but that's Polly's middle name. She'd give you the moon on a little silk string if she thought you wanted it, all because she's your sorority mother. (*Sputtering.*) "Mother," indeed. That's a laugh.

VEE (*calmly*). That's what I think, too.

GUSSY. Vee, you don't seem to understand this mother-daughter business. I know it sounds a little absurd, but the idea is to make sure no girl who pledges Beta Gam will feel left out. (*Vee laughs shortly.*) She'll always have some one particular person she can go to when she needs help or encouragement.

VEE (*harshly*). Yes, and how do you go about setting up this lovely, lovely gossamer bond?

BESS. You know well enough.

VEE (*snapping it out*). Right. (*Stands with back against corner of Bess's study table.*) You sit down there in fraternity and parcel out the new pledges like they were . . . well, I don't know what. It's all right at first, but pretty soon you come down to the lemon at the tail end, and who wants *her*? Nobody!

BESS (*as nasty as Vee*). Well, what're you grouching about? Polly took you, didn't she?

GUSSY. Hush, Bess . . .

VEE (*smiling dangerously*). Sure, she took me, all right. And she'll go on being dutiful and loyal and all the rest, but I don't go for that stuff. (*Bess grinds out cigarette.*) That's not *my* idea of mother-love.

BESS. What would *you* know about it? I'll bet you never had a human emotion in your whole life.

VEE (*returning to her manicure with a shrug*). Life becomes quite simple when you leave out emotion.

BESS (*crosses to dresser, gets comb from drawer, and starts to fix her hair*). Who wants it to be simple? (*Can't see what she's doing. Jerks pink shade off one of lamps,*

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and slams it down on the dresser top.) Damn these things! When I want light I want it undiluted.

VEE. That's the whole trouble with you; you want everything undiluted. And most of us can't stomach such concentrated doses of life and living.

[Marge sticks her head in again from the left. She is now dressed, and is unbraiding her hair quickly.]

MARGE. Hey! Anybody wanta be my escort to the Strand?

GUSSY. No thanks, Marge.

[Bess is too angry and Vee too preoccupied to pay much attention.]

MARGE. I just found out this' minute. It's Clark Gable in "It Happened One Night." Jiminy! Whatta revival!

[Exits left.]

VEE (*snappishly*). I don't see why we buy a paper. Marge gives us all the news.

BESS (*pushing lamp shade back into place -- but much askew*). And I don't see why the devil you ever pledged Beta Gam anyway. You wouldn't have a good word for the Grand National First Vice President.

VEE (*pretending to yawn*). This is where I came in, I think.

BESS (*completely losing her temper*). But what I really don't understand is why we ever let Polly talk us into letting you go ahead and get initiated.

VEE (*turning in her chair to face Bess*). What are you talking about?

GUSSY (*nervously*). Bess, for God's sake don't do something you'll be sorry about . . .

BESS (*blowing up*). Sorry about! My God in his little pink heaven! I've never been anything *but* sorry since the day we pledged this brat. Sorry! That's some poor pitiful word for the way I feel.

VEE (*quietly*). I know quite well how you feel — in fact,

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how everybody feels. But what I want to know is what Polly has to do with my getting my pin.

Gussy (*trying to smooth things over, comes down right*).

What Bess means is this. Just before we hold initiation we always have a sort of last-minute vote to weed out those who don't seem to fit. And Polly just kind of gave you an extra big build-up. You know . . .

[*Finishes lamely.*]

Bess. Yes, it's *supposed* to weed out all the duds like you, Vee. But this time Polly talked the whole damn sorority into putting up with you. (*Vee sits quietly without any change in expression.*) Why, I don't know — except it'd take a pretty hard heart to resist Polly Graham, especially when she cries.

VEE (*still quietly*). Polly cried — over me?

Gussy. Yes, Vee . . . you.

[*Vee is shocked and moved for a moment. Then she curls her lips in scorn and returns to her manicure.*]

VEE. Then she's an even bigger fool than I thought. That's going pretty far even for a "loyal," "dutiful" mother.

[*Polly walks right past the door with a light bulb in her right hand. Bess sees her and plunges out to get her.*]

Bess. Polly!

[*Brings her into room. They stand just down from door, which Bess has closed.*]

POLLY (*laughing*). What's all this! A kidnaping?

Bess (*deadly serious*). Listen, Polly, you and I have been friends for nearly four years now. And when you asked me to take Vee for my roommate, I did it — but just because it was you who asked me to.

POLLY (*worriedly breaking in*). Bess, don't talk like this!

[*Puts her hand on Bess's arm.*]

Bess (*pulling free*). But I'm resigning — right now! I flatly refuse to sit here in a ringside seat while she steals Fred Mason from you and insults you every time she opens her mouth!

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POLLY (*still calm*). Insults me? What do you mean?

GUSSY (*trying to clear things up*). Bess was telling Vee that you kept us from blackballing her at initiation time . . .

POLLY. Bess! You *shouldn't* have . . . (*Tosses light bulb onto lower bed and goes down to Vee, placing her hands on her shoulders. Vee remains defiant, but stops her manicure.*) That's a terrible thing to say to anyone. Vee dear, they just didn't understand you. I simply told them to give you a fair chance — that all you needed was a little more time . . .

VEE (*sneering but with an effort*). I don't need anybody to apologize for me . . .

POLLY (*shaking Vee gently*). Vee! Vee, listen to me.

VEE (*springing up and facing Polly*). Oh, *stop* it! You've played this mother act long enough. I've got my pin now. I'm no longer just a pledge, so you can stop pretending to like me.

POLLY. But I'm *not* pretending, Vee.

VEE (*defiantly raising her chin*). Sure, sure, you love me deeply and tenderly. I can just feature it!

POLLY (*softly and with great sincerity*). Yes, Vee, I think I do. (*Vee stares at Polly with unbelief, but as the scene goes on she gradually becomes convinced.*) You may think I'm sentimental but — I don't care. All my life I've wanted a younger sister — terribly. When I was a little girl I used to dream about what she'd look like. She was always tiny and dainty, and she always had such pretty hair (*Touches Vee's hair.*) just the color of yours. And when I first saw you last fall I couldn't help feeling you were the little sister I had dreamed up out of nothing. (*In an even lower key.*) And I couldn't help loving you — very, very much. (*Looks at her hands, half in shame, then at Vee.*) Do you believe me, Vee?

[*The tableau is held for a long moment. Vee touches Polly's hand, then goes upstage to closet. Others stand*

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quietly watching Vee, as she fingers the skirt of her "formal." Suddenly she jerks the hanger from the door and pushes the dress inside the closet, closing the door and leaning upon it as she speaks.

VEE. If you still want to, Polly, I'd like to work on those place-cards.

[Without looking at anyone or waiting for an answer, she exits right, quickly but with dignity. Bess whistles softly in amazement.

POLLY *(a little bewildered herself)*. What a fool I've been, not to have talked more freely. But I didn't realize — how very lonely and confused she was.

GUSSY *(striving for the light note again)*. The victory of psychology over biology, Bess.

BESS *(still somewhat unconvinced and sarcastic; gestures toward closet as she speaks to Polly)*. And I suppose that Grand Gesture was meant to tell you that you can have Fred back again?

POLLY *(smiling)*. What makes you think I ever lost him?

GUSSY. What! }

BESS. My God! }

(Together.)

POLLY. I was awfully worried about Vee. But Fred . . . well, he runs a temperature easily and gets over it even quicker.

[Exits right with light bulb.

BESS *(starting to put manicure set together with absent-minded fingers)*. Well! I'm glad I'm a greasy grind!

[Marge enters from left, carrying a long florist's box. An opened envelope and card are in her hands. She is wearing a light coat and is completely dressed to go out.

MARGE *(looking around the room)*. Hey, didn't I hear Polly's voice? I've got a dozen bee-ootiful pink roses here for her. From Fred.

GUSSY. But Fred was taking Vee to the dance.

MARGE *(gesturing with card)*. All I know is what I read in other people's mail. And this's got Vee's name crossed

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out and Polly's put in. (*Sighs exaggeratedly.*) With all his love. . . . Isn't love stupifying?

BESS. No cracks from you, please! Polly's in her room.

MARGE. Oh, no offense, ma-dame! (*Exits right, then sticks her head back just long enough to say.*) Hey, kittens — almost forgot. The plumber just came. And know what? He's tall, dark, and . . . *ugly!*
[*Exits.*]

Curtain

SERVICE CLUB
By
WILLIAM M. KEPHART

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CAST

MISS KENDRICK, *the junior hostess*

MRS. KELLY, *the senior hostess*

"CHUCK" }
"BERNEY" } *Two privates*

A CORPORAL, *of the M.P.'s*

PRIVATE GEORGE JONES

PRIVATE SAM JONES

TIME. The present.

PLACE. The Service Club of a U.S. Army Training Camp.

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The scene is the hostess' office in the Service Club of a United States Army Training Camp, — any training camp, because all Service Clubs are identical, — board for board, identical. And yet there is evidence of a sincere attempt to minimize the blue-printed appearance of the room. Some brightly colored pictures add warmth, although the contrast between these and the unpainted pine board background is at first rather hard on the eye. There is no rug, and the floor, also, is of unpainted pine.

The large, square windows, right, are curtained. It is dark outside. The office is situated on the second floor, and upper right there is a door leading out and down to the main floor of the Service Club. To one looking through the glass part of the door, practically all of the main floor — writing desks, piano, etc. — can be seen, although this is not visible to the audience. At left center there is a doorway, also leading out and down — not directly to the main floor, but to the lobby and cafeteria.

At right center there is a surprisingly modern desk with a late model typewriter. Behind the desk, and to one side, there is a steel filing cabinet. Upper left there is a table with some magazines. Just inside the doorway, left, there is an easy chair. All the other chairs are plain wooden ones, with no attempt at design. Moreover, the room is bereft of moulding, which fact makes for a clash between the horizontal and vertical lines.

All in all, the room reflects the atmosphere of the entire Service Club. The picture is a pathetic one. And yet as people and soldiers enter and talk and leave, we begin to see that moulding would be wrong, that there is a straightforward strength about the room which, every so often, is needed by people and soldiers.

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As the curtain rises, the junior hostess, Miss Kendrick, is leafing through some folders at the filing cabinet. She is a pleasant looking young girl of about twenty-five, well mannered and cheerful. Down on the main floor someone with a sing-song touch on the piano is playing, "I Don't Want To Set The World On Fire."

Voices are heard through the doorway at the left, and the senior hostess, Mrs. Kelly, enters laughingly. She is followed by two privates, Chuck, and Berney. Mrs. K., as she is called, is a good-looking woman in her late twenties, exceedingly well dressed, and amazingly alert. She possesses the rare quality of helping other people, not by lending them her shoulder, but by projecting herself into their situation and attacking the problem through sheer insight and understanding. Chuck and Berney are trainees getting their thirteen weeks' "basic." They aren't more than twenty-two years old, but both agree that a fighting man has no business doing K.P.

BERNEY. And all over two dead bed bugs! O.K. Two dead ones. We lose the war on account of it!

CHUCK. They're not even ours; they're from two cycles ago!

BERNEY. Just like the brassière! Somebody finds a brassière in the barracks from two cycles ago, and what happens? The whole platoon gets gigged for a week!

MRS. K. (*unto the children*). How you must have suffered . . .

BERNEY (*the warrior*). It's little things like that that get you down — and those scrambled eggs for breakfast every morning — they don't help any!

CHUCK. And will you answer me one question: Why do we get up at five o'clock? What can we do at five that we can't do at eight?

MISS KENDRICK (*brightly*). You can't watch the sun rise!

CHUCK. We don't see no sun rise — the moon ain't through yet!

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MRS. K. (*good naturedly*). Last week you complained about the barracks being too clean. Now it's the moon!

BERNEY. But you should see those barracks! The floor shines. Three times a day we mop it!

CHUCK. Yeh, I don't like places so clean. They give me the chills!

MISS KENDRICK. That's not the way I heard it!

BERNEY. Well, not three times every day.

MRS. K. (*smiling*). Really, boys, what was it you wanted to see me about? What is it this time?

BERNEY (*pauses a moment*). Well, on Monday they rung a bed check in on us. Eleven o'clock and in bed — or else. That was on Monday.

CHUCK (*blurts out*). Yeh, and on Tuesday we missed bed check and today's Wednesday!

BERNEY. Three minutes we're late! Three minutes and we flubbed the dub!

MISS KENDRICK. Well, what happened — after you flubbed the dub?

BERNEY. Nothing — yet. The C.O. wants to see us in his office tomorrow morning.

CHUCK. We was mis-led by the draft board . . .

MRS. K. If you missed bed check, all you'll get will be some extra K.P.

CHUCK. Extra! We spend more time in the kitchen now than we do on . . .

MISS KENDRICK. A little K.P. never hurt anybody, Chuck.

BERNEY. But it's the principal of the thing. We're three minutes late, and bingo — back to the pots. (*Pauses.*) Other guys get away with murder.

CHUCK (*meaningfully*). A sentry leaves his post, and what happens? Nothing!

BERNEY. Yeh, we can't miss bed check, but if a guy puts his rifle down and leaves his post, that's different!

MRS. K. Puts his rifle down and leaves his post? What on earth are you talking about?

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BERNEY. A guard — out there (*Points to the window.*)
lays down his rifle and takes off. Just like that.

CHUCK. One minute he's walking just ahead of us. Next
minute down goes his rifle and away he walks.

BERNEY. But just let us miss bed check and . . .

MRS. K. (*interrupting*). Wait a minute, boys. Do you
mean that the guard out there left his post?

BERNEY. Yes, ma'am, just as sure as we're standin' here.

MRS. K. But deserting your post is a court martial offense.
You're not making up a good story, are you,
Berney?

BERNEY. No, ma'am. It happened right up the road
there. One minute he's there and the next minute he
ain't. Just look out the window. Dollars to G.I.
doughnuts you don't see the guard.

MRS. K. (*goes to the window*). No. No, I can't see any-
one. But his post extends around to the other side of
the Service Club. Just because we can't see him . . .

CHUCK. His post extends right on out, "over the hill."

BERNEY. He can get away with that, but when we . . .

MRS. K. (*interrupting*). No. (*She picks up the phone.*)
I don't think any one gets away with desertion. (*Into
the phone.*) Hello — hello, will you please send the
M.P. at the door up to my office? Yes, right away,
thank you. (*To the boys.*) Missing bed check is one
thing, but for desertion you get — more than some extra
K.P.

CHUCK. Looks like everybody's got problems.

MRS. K. Well, I wouldn't worry about yours. I can
promise you you'll get off easy. Just don't make a
habit of missing bed check. (*She has walked to the door,
right, and is looking down on the main floor.*) Chuck,
how would you and Berney like to meet some nice young
ladies?

BERNEY (*ever the warrior*). Huh? Girls? Is that what
you said, girls?

[*The M.P. enters, right. On his left arm he wears the*

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familiar black arm band of the M.P.'s. Two chevrons on his left arm indicate that he is a corporal.

MRS. K. Yes. We're having our Wednesday night dance tonight (*Looking at Miss Kendrick.*) and I think it could be arranged. Miss Kendrick?

MISS KENDRICK (*laughingly*). K.P. notwithstanding, I think so.

CHUCK. That's what we need, something for our morale.

MISS KENDRICK. Come on with me. We'll go down and I'll introduce you. (*As they exit, right.*) Which will it be, blonde or brunette?

MRS. K. (*calling after them, mockingly*). Don't forget bed check at eleven. (*Turns to the M.P.*) Corporal, are you familiar with the guard post around the Service Club?

M.P. Yes, ma'am, I think so.

MRS. K. Good. Here's what I want you to do. The guard out there seems to be missing. I—I don't want to call the officer of the day until I'm sure. So I want you to walk around the area and report back here. I want to know whether the guard has left his post.

M.P. I understand, Mrs. K. It won't take long.

MRS. K. One more thing. If he is walking guard, say nothing of this to any one. Just report back here.

M.P. Yes, ma'am.

[*Exits, right. Mrs. K. goes to the window and looks down. At this moment the Public Address System on the main floor blares out: "Don't forget the big stage show direct from Broadway at Theater #2 tomorrow evening at 8:00. Admission free. Theatre #2 at 8:00." She is still looking through the window when Private George Jones enters at the left. He differs from any of the preceding soldiers in that he is dressed in the complete "Class A" uniform of the sentry or guard. He wears the blouse, bayonet, cartridge belt, and leggings, but is lacking the rifle. He is older than the average private. He is between forty and forty-five. But it is not his age that strikes one. It is*

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something else. His eyes. The life has gone out of his eyes. Private Jones is in his second World War.

JONES (*waits for a moment, then*). Are you Mrs. Kelly?

MRS. K. (*starts slightly, turns*). Oh — yes, I'm Mrs. K. Come in.

JONES. I am Private Jones. Private George Jones. Some one told me that you help soldiers, and I wondered . . .

MRS. K. Why, of course, George. I'd be glad to help in any way I can. Come on, sit over here. Now what is it?

[*She has him sit on a chair by the desk, but in the ensuing conversation, they both move about the room. As Private Jones talks, his tone is sometimes bitter, sometimes sad. At times it is a little incredulous. But very often his words are like his eyes. The life has gone out of them.*

JONES. I've just walked off guard.

MRS. K. Oh, then you . . . Go on, George.

JONES (*vacuously*). I'm supposed to be walking guard — out there (*Points to the window.*) but I'm through. I walked off. I'd been thinking for a long time, and I walked off. I was guarding this area. My post ran past that window. I had seen the light up here. I laid my rifle down. And then I walked off.

MRS. K. But that's a serious offense, George. It's court martial. Go back to your post before some one finds out. You can come back tomorrow and we can talk . . .

JONES. No. You don't understand. I've walked off more than guard. I'm through. I've walked off — of everything.

MRS. K. (*changing her tone*). Perhaps you'd better tell me — more, George. Things are never as bad as they seem, believe me. Just what is it?

JONES (*still walking guard*). I don't know. It's everything put together. Things added up for a long time. And now tonight they add up all at once.

MRS. K. (*softly*). I understand.

JONES (*stands up and looks at her*). This is my second

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World War. *And you can't understand that. (Pause.)*

Nobody can. Except us.

MRS. K. No, no one can understand that, except you.

JONES. In 1917 I used the same type of gun that I carried tonight. *The same type.* The '03 Springfield. . . .

Every time I picked it up I saw a thousand poppies.

MRS. K. Go ahead, Private Jones, I'm listening.

JONES. Twenty-five years ago I believed what I was fighting for — freedom, liberty, democracy. But even before the war was over I'd begun to doubt. I began to feel that I was small and insignificant, that I was being used.

MRS. K. That was only natural.

JONES. And then after the armistice it was even worse.

Everybody said that the war had been a farce, a three-ring circus with a handful of capitalists as ringmasters. Maybe that part is true and maybe not. Maybe it doesn't even matter . . .

MRS. K. What does matter, George?

JONES. What does matter is that I walked off and I'm not going back. Don't you see that there's nothing for me now — or ever. My job won't be waiting, and at my age I'll be too old to start over again at something new. *(Pauses.)* And when I was drafted, my wife — it was the second time for her, too. This time, when the draft board said she was able to work and that I had to go, she — she wasn't well when I left. *(He turns to her.)* I lose. If we lose, I lose. But if we win, I still lose!

[At this point the Public Address System blares forth: "Wanted, two soldiers to go to a chicken dinner on Sunday. Register at the front desk."]

MRS. K. And is that why you walked off, George?

JONES *(gropingly)*. No. I don't know. It all added up . . . and then it became something different. I — I've lost faith in human nature. Something's gone. There are no reasons left. That's when I walked off. I had to. There were no reasons for walking on.

MRS. K. But think of your wife, George . . . and your

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friends, and the people you love. Aren't they worth going on for — fighting for?

JONES. I suppose they are. And I've told myself that a million times. But it's gone beyond all that. I just don't *feel* anything.

MRS. K. Then how about yourself, George. You've got to live with yourself the rest of your life, and even if it's only to make life bearable while you live . . .

JONES. I know. But I just don't feel anything. I don't feel as though I *ought to do anything*. (*Goes to the door, right, and looks down.*) Not for them. Not even for me.

MRS. K. You eat and sleep with them, George.

JONES (*in a terrible tone*). Tonight — out there — while I was walking, the guard on the next area stopped me. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do, because — because he was illiterate and couldn't read the General Orders. He asked me to read them to him, so that he would know what to do. And I read them to him. (*Looks at her, confused.*) His name was Jones, too. After he'd left, I got to thinking. "He's Jones. I'm Jones. We're all Jones and none of us can understand the General Orders!" It was then that everything added up at once in a sort of flash. And then it was gone. And in its place was an awful God-hollow feeling . . .

MRS. K. Yes, when . . . I can't think of much to say, George . . .

JONES. My rifle became a shovel and I was digging graves. I couldn't carry it any more. (*He walks to the door and looks down at the soldiers on the main floor. Then, wretchedly.*) Will they never stop beating the little man . . .

MRS. K. (*simply*). I'm a little man, too, George. In fact, there's an invisible sign over the entrance to this building. It says, "These Are The Portals of The Little Man." (*She pauses.*) Not the little man of labor or industry or the farm, but the real little man, the little

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man of history. And they all come here: generals, captains, privates — to write letters and things. You see, George, all the Service Clubs are alike. Board for board, alike. And all the little men are pretty much alike, too. It's pathetic in a way — and yet it's beautiful. It's pathetic because they really don't want to write letters — all they want is a change. It's beautiful because they *do* write letters. (*Looking at him.*) And they do carry on. (*They are looking down.*) We both look down, but I see the beauty in man, and you can't even see faith in him.

JONES. But why do they carry on?

MRS. K. For a thousand reasons. But the way one soldier said it, I think would cover them all. He said, "It's a damn good country and there are some damn good people in it."

JONES. But that doesn't answer anything!

MRS. K. For that boy, it answered everything.

JONES (*slowly*). But is there a reason under the sun why man should fight? (*Deliberately.*) Can there be any mortal cause for people — the little man — to swarm over one another?

MRS. K. No. There can be none. It's only when one of the little men forgets that he is little . . .

JONES. But it only makes matters worse to go on fighting.

MRS. K. No! It's true that there is no reason why men should start to fight. But that's no longer the question. Other men *have* started to fight. And now we have no choice. Except to promise ourselves it won't happen again.

JONES (*bitterly*). That's what they said before. They played the band then, too. And after it was over we were told that we'd been rented!

MRS. K. (*ever so slowly*). However that may have been, it is unfortunate that before December 7, 1941, any one was a flag waver who spoke highly of his country — or of the things it stood for. It was that condition which

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all but made a parody of patriotism, and it was that more than anything else which permitted Hitler to get such a big lead. Being patriotic was out of style. It wasn't being done. It went out and streamlining came in. And we streamlined ourselves right into another war. And right out of the hearts of men like you, George.

JONES. But patriotism always leads to wars!

MRS. K. Not the healthy kind! Oh, I realize that that's not the final and best answer. Eventually — when we show that we're ready for it — we'll see a United States of the World. But the trouble was, George, the people almost threw out *our* United States before we were ready for the other. Thank heavens we learned before it was too late that it is a "damn good country, and some damn good people in it."

[*At this point the Public Address System blares again:*
"Wanted, two pinochle players. Two pinochle players wanted — report to the lobby!"

JONES. But that's all theory. You see it and you read it and it's easy enough to say things like that. But I don't feel it. I — it's only theory.

MRS. K. (*goes to the window and looks out*). Perhaps I am — too much theory.

JONES. It took a long time to get rid of that feeling — of being used. (*Lapsing into his former mood.*) And when I was walking guard out there, I suddenly got the same feeling. Only a lot worse. Everything seemed to crash on my head at once. *Twice in a man's life is too much!* I've just lost faith in everybody.

[*The door is opened, right, and the M.P. enters.*

M.P. Everything's O.K., Mrs. Kelly.

MRS. K. (*puzzled*). O.K.?

M.P. Yes, ma'am, he's walking his post all right. Somebody must have been mistaken.

MRS. K. (*looks first at Jones, then at the M.P.*). You mean this area is being guarded in the usual manner?

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M.P. Well, I — the guard is walking his post all right,
Mrs. K.

MRS. K. You haven't answered my question, Corporal.

M.P. Well — well, the truth is, the area is being guarded all right, but the guard is carrying two guns. And there's nothing in regulations that says a sentry can't carry two guns.

MRS. K. (*still mystified*). Yes, but . . . Corporal, will you go down and tell that guard I want to see him for a minute.

M.P. You mean send him up here?

MRS. K. Yes, send him up here.

M.P. Yes, ma'am, anything you say.

[*Exits, right.*]

MRS. K. Who else knows what area you're supposed to be guarding, George?

JONES. I don't know. Only the sergeant of the guard. And that Jones, who can't read.

MRS. K. Nobody else?

JONES. No.

MRS. K. You'd better wait out there in the hallway, George, until I've talked with whoever it is out there. (*She takes him to the doorway, left.*) It won't take long. Just wait in there.

[*She turns around just in time to see Private Sam Jones enter, right. Like his namesake, he is dressed in the full uniform of the sentry. He is holding two rifles. He is a young boy, about twenty-three. Sam is what is known in the army as a "Grade V Man," the "Five" standing for the lowest category of the army general intelligence test, Grade One being the highest. And yet, as is often the case with Grade Five men, there is a pronounced likeableness about him. He is direct, and most of the time he wears the kind of smile that makes people smile with him. One quickly gets the impression, that contrary to being handicapped by his low mentality, he — although not fully un-*

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derstanding it — is enjoying life, and is thereby helping others enjoy it.

SAM JONES. I'm Sam Jones.

MRS. K. (*taken by his smile*). Hello, Sam Jones. Come in.

SAM JONES. Yes, ma'am.

MRS. K. What on earth are you doing with two rifles?

SAM JONES. I found this (*Holds up one of the rifles.*) out there. I thought I better carry it.

MRS. K. Well, Sam, it was nice of you to do that.

SAM JONES. When the other fella gets back, I'll give it to him.

MRS. K. What other fellow, Sam?

SAM JONES. Fella that was guardin' next to me tonight.

That's his gun. He had to go somewhere, I guess, and he left it. But he'll be back; he'll be needin' it, so I thought I best carry it for him.

MRS. K. You say he had to go somewhere, Sam?

SAM JONES. Yes, ma'am. I think he did.

MRS. K. But where did he go?

SAM JONES. Somewheres. Maybe for his raincoat or somethin'. But he'll be back for that (*Points to the rifle.*) 'cause you can't walk guard without it.

MRS. K. How did you happen to find it, Sam? Were you in his area?

SAM JONES. Well, I didn't see him on the round, and I figgered maybe somethin' was wrong, so I walked his area once't. Then I seen his rifle on the ground and I knew everythin' was O.K., and that he'd be back. So I thought I best carry it for him.

MRS. K. Why are you so sure that he'll be back, Sam? Maybe he's not coming back . . .

SAM JONES. Not coming back! (*Can't conceive of the idea.*) He's a guard. And guards — well, they just guard. 'Till they're relieved. Oh, he'll be back. He's the one told me that. Read it right off the General Orders. (*With a big grin.*) I can't read.

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MRS. K. (*loud enough so that George can't help hearing*).

You can't read, so he read them to you and you're sure he'll be back . . .

SAM JONES. Sure. If anything happened he woulda called me. That's in the General Orders, too. He read it to me. He'll be back for his gun. He'll be needin' it for guardin'.

MRS. K. But in the meantime, what will happen until he gets back?

SAM JONES. Oh, I'll be walkin' his area for him 'till he gets back.

MRS. K. You'll be doing double duty, Sam. You won't get any sleep.

SAM JONES. No fun sleepin'. I like it out there walkin' with the stars. Sometimes I like somebody to talk to, though. But he'll be back for his gun. He has a nice friendly post, right past the window there, and he'll be needin' his gun for guardin'.

MRS. K. Yes, after he — gets his raincoat, he'll be needin' his gun for guardin'.

SAM JONES. Well, I'll be gettin' back to the area — I don't want to miss him.

[*He starts to leave.*]

MRS. K. Goodbye, Sam Jones. You'll find him.

SAM JONES. Goodbye, ma'am.

[*Exits, right.*]

MRS. K. (*starts for the doorway, left, but George is already standing in the doorway; he appears somewhat shaken*).
You heard?

JONES (*hollowly*). Yes.

MRS. K. The Jones who can't read . . .

JONES (*crosses over and looks out of the window, as if he still can't believe what he has just heard*). He's walking both areas . . .

MRS. K. And it's not in the General Orders, is it, George?

JONES. No. It's not in the General Orders.

MRS. K. What are you thinking?

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JONES. I don't know. I give up thinking.

MRS. K. Oh, George, now don't you see what I mean? Things like that make words seem so empty. He couldn't believe that you weren't coming back. "Guards just guard. 'Till they're relieved," he said. And that's what you told him. And he'd walk out there until he dropped, waiting for you to come back.

JONES. Yes, I know, but he — he doesn't understand . . . He's young . . .

MRS. K. He's older than you are — in a way. Somehow, he saw something in you that you couldn't see. (*Pauses.*) You've got to go back, George.

JONES. But that feeling — of being used. I'll never lose that!

MRS. K. (*in a low voice*). I know. Twenty-five years ago you were hurt. And now you're hurt again. You couldn't find any one person to blame it on, so you spread it over everybody. The trouble is that you can't lose faith in the little man, George, without losing some in yourself. That's why it's so difficult to answer you. (*Pauses, then quickly.*) Look, George, if the war were to end tomorrow, that wouldn't change things, would it? You'd still have that feeling, wouldn't you?

JONES. I suppose so.

MRS. K. Then what you're really asking is not a reason for fighting or dying, but a *reason for living!*

JONES. I — I don't know.

MRS. K. And you do *want* that faith restored, don't you, George. . You *want* to feel that there are reasons for things?

JONES. I don't know. I'm not sure.

MRS. K. Well, I am. *If you didn't want to gain faith, you never would have come to me. When you came in with the idea of coming up here, that was the first step! (For the first time, Jones' eyes seem to light up a bit. He starts to speak, but she continues.)* People — those boys down there — they're all right, George. Out on

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the field — even though they're only training now — they go through a lot together. They find something in each other — unconsciously, perhaps — that they didn't know was there. They help each other in a thousand little ways. And it's those little ways that make the real army, not the guns and cannon. You can have the biggest and best guns in the world, George, but if the men don't help each other there is no army.

JONES. I — I helped men once.

MRS. K. Go out and help them again. And be helped. Crawl through the mud with them. Oh, you'll find some bad in everybody, but not nearly enough to spread the whole way round. You told me that if we win, you still lose. The truth is that if you find that something in them and in yourself, then if we lose you still win!

JONES. Win . . .

MRS. K. Go ahead, George. You'll be needin' your gun for guardin'. *(Neither of them speaks for a moment. The Public Address System breaks the silence: "Mrs. Kelly is wanted in the lobby. Paging Mrs. Kelly . . ."* *She turns to him.*) Oh, excuse me, George, I'll be back in a moment.

[She starts for the door, left, when the loud speaker again announces: "Mrs. Kelly is wanted in the lobby. Paging Mrs. Colin Kelly . . . Mrs. Colin P. Kelly." George watches her go through the doorway with a mingled expression on his face. He looks toward the window, then toward the doorway through which the senior hostess has gone. He turns and walks toward the door, right. Down on the main floor some one with a sing-song touch on the piano is playing, "I Don't Want To Set The World On Fire."]

Curtain

ALEXANDER PROPOSES

By

JEAN LYONS

**DEDICATED TO
CECILY PURCELL**

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CAST

AUNT BESSIE

AUNT DELIA

AUNT ROSE

ELLEN

ALEXANDER WORTHFIELD

TIME. The present, early May.

PLACE. The play takes place in the course of one afternoon in the living room of the Aunts' home.

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In the living room of a large, somewhat outdated but fastidiously kept home, French doors at left lead to the garden; a door at right leads to Ellen's room. To the left is a furniture group consisting of a sofa, a chair, and an end table. Against right is a smallish square table, flanked by chairs. There are also some dated photographs about the room, bric-a-brac, and possibly a fern in a large wicker stand near the corner at upstage left. Bessie, Delia and Rose, all spinsters, wear stiff clothes, somewhat suggestive of the 1890's. They are flourishing about the living room of their home when the curtain rises.

ROSE. It seems to me this is a lot of trouble to go to over one young man.

DELIA. I should say it is.

BESSIE. I don't think he should come here in the first place. The whole thing is ridiculous and in extremely bad taste, if you ask me!

ROSE. Well, if Ellen persists in seeing this young man, I suppose it's better for her to bring him here than to go galavanting around the streets with him somewhere.
[She rolls back edges of the rug and mops.]

DELIA. Yes. *(She sighs.)* I suppose we owe it to our dear dead sister to take care of Ellen and see that she has a place to bring her friends to.

ROSE. Friends! *(She stops to look distastefully at the rug.)* Ellen always has had a place to bring her friends to. But a man! That's something different!

DELIA. I sometimes think that youth, or young people at least, are quite a nuisance.

ROSE *(sourly)*. Unfortunately they can't be helped!

BESSIE *(wistfully)*. I wonder what he's like.

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ROSE. Probably a chain smoker.

BESSIE. Imagine our Ellen engaged . . .

[Ellen enters through door at stage left. She is a pretty girl, about twenty-two, dressed in a light cotton frock and low heeled shoes. She wears a sun hat, carries a pair of scissors in one hand and a newspaper filled with freshly cut flowers in the other. She puts the flowers down on the table at stage left, rubs her forehead with the back of her arm.]

ELLEN. My, it's warm in the garden! Oh! I'm sorry, Aunt Bessie, I didn't mean to interrupt. What were you saying?

BESSIE. Nothing. Just that it's strange to think of you as being engaged.

ELLEN. Well, that's just it. I'm not engaged. That is, not yet. *(Delia, Bessie and Rose look shocked and chorus: "Not engaged!")* Well — uh — no-o. That is, not exactly.

ROSE. What's he coming here for, then?

[There is an ominous pause while the three aunts stare at Ellen. Bessie titters, gulps and smothers her giggle behind her hand.]

ELLEN. Well — uh — you see — I'm hoping he'll propose today. You see, he said — he said — he had something important to talk to me about, so I — er — thought . . . Well . . .

ROSE. Hoping! Huh! My dear, hoping will never get you a husband.

[Bessie titters. Rose sends her a sharp look.]

DELIA. Well, whether he's going to marry Ellen or not, he'll be here in a few minutes and we haven't finished our cleaning yet. Ellen, you'd better start dressing.

[Delia gathers up her dusting rags and exits through upstage door.]

ROSE *(she gathers up flowers at table stage right)*. Well, I'll arrange these in a bowl, but goodness knows, for what!

[Rose exits through stage left. Bessie, who is still at

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the window curtain, looks around the room to make sure she is alone with Ellen. Ellen, unaware of Bessie's antics, drops wearily onto the sofa.

BESSIE (*mysteriously*). Ellen!

ELLEN (*startled*). Yes, Auntie?

BESSIE. Do you love him?

ELLEN (*guardedly*). Who . . . ?

BESSIE. Your young man, of course. Alexander.

ELLEN. Why, I . . .

BESSIE. Of course you do. (*Bessie meditates a moment. She sighs.*) It seems we never learn until it's too late.

ELLEN. Learn what?

BESSIE. Why, how to propose to a man.

ELLEN. Auntie!

BESSIE. Don't be so shocked, my dear. (*Bessie begins to giggle.*) You sound like a — spinster.

ELLEN. But auntie . . .

BESSIE. All right, then, how to make a man propose to you. It's all the same thing.

ELLEN. But I don't want to make him propose. If he's really in love with me I won't have to *make* him propose.

BESSIE. That's what you think! (*There is a pause. Bessie thinks out loud.*) Ah! if I had only known thirty years ago what I know now — well, I'd be married to Elmer now.

ELLEN. Elmer?

BESSIE (*wistfully*). Yes, Elmer. I was in love with him, you know.

ELLEN. No. I didn't know. Was he in love with you?

BESSIE (*withdrawing crossly and clearing her throat*). That's beside the point!

ELLEN. Yes-s-s. Of course.

BESSIE. The point is, that he would have been in love with me if I had known then what I know now. It's just a matter of feminine guile that makes the difference between a married woman — and me.

ELLEN. Feminine guile!

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BESSIE. Yes, feminine guile. Men never propose to you out of a clear blue sky, just because they want to. My dear, will you please stop looking at me like that. I really believe that you're too naive for this sort of conversation. Perhaps I should never have started it. Oh, well, I suppose you're just like I was at your age — romantic, idealistic, and — *and thoroughly impractical!*
[*She goes back to the window curtain. There is a pause in which Ellen is absorbing what Bessie has said.*]

ELLEN (*prodding*). Aunt Bessie, if you — that is — if you had it all to do over again — well, what would you do? I mean, how would you get Elmer to propose?

BESSIE (*promptly*). I'd use the motherly approach.

ELLEN. I don't want to sound old-fashioned, Auntie, but aren't men supposed to do all the approaching?

BESSIE. No. They're only supposed to think they're doing it.

ELLEN. Oh!

BESSIE. But Ellen, what I'm trying to tell you is that there is only one way to get a husband.

ELLEN. How?

BESSIE. By mothering him. Men are all little boys at heart. They want to be mothered and taken care of and babied. They like to pretend they're big and strong and capable, but when it comes time to get married they want someone who'll take care of them, watch over them, scold them, and . . .

[*She shrugs, at a loss for words.*]

ELLEN (*timidly*). And — and — love them?

BESSIE (*stiffening*). Now you're getting silly!

ELLEN. But, Auntie, if you don't love them, then what's the good of being married to them?

BESSIE. My dear, since I've never been married myself, that's one problem I've never had to worry about.

ELLEN. Oh.

BESSIE. However, if you follow my advice, you have every

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opportunity of becoming a happily married young woman.

ELLEN. Auntie, I was just wondering . . .

BESSIE. Yes, Ellen . . . ?

ELLEN. How can I "mother" Alexander, like today, for instance, when I haven't got anything to mother him about?

BESSIE. Well, when he hurts himself, you sympathize with him. Run for the idoine. Bandage him up . . .

ELLEN. But how can he hurt himself? There isn't anything wrong with him.

BESSIE. Don't worry about that. Just follow my advice and leave everything to me. There may not be anything wrong with him when he comes in here — but there could be . . .

[Bessie sing-songs the last. The expression on her face is very smug.]

ELLEN. Wait! Aunt Bessie! What are you going to do?

BESSIE. Well, to start with, we can put this little end table out from the sofa, just a few inches. So! Just enough to make it possible for Alexander to stumble over. If that doesn't work, there are other things — any number of them.

ELLEN. Wait, Auntie! You can't do that! Stop! Come back here. What are you going to do?

[Rose enters through door at stage left. Ellen is still worrying about Bessie, who has exited.]

ROSE. I've been wanting to talk to you, Ellen.

ELLEN (*absently*). Wh-what? Oh, yes, Aunt Rose.

ROSE. You haven't had much experience with men, Ellen. You're having a young man call on you today.

ELLEN. Yes, I know.

ROSE. I want to give you a little motherly advice. From all I hear, this Alexander person is a thoroughly eligible and suitable young man. He sounds as if he would make

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you a good husband. You will do well to act accordingly, that is, to conduct yourself so favorably that he will consider you an appropriate wife.

ELLEN. Yes, Aunt Rose.

ROSE. When a man makes his choice of a woman to be his wife, he looks for breeding. Therefore it is your duty to exhibit to him these most desired qualities in yourself. For a wife, a man wants someone he can look up to, some one who bears herself with nobleness and dignity and grace, someone with taste and culture. In short, the most desired quality in a suitable wife is that of queenliness.

ELLEN. Queenliness?

ROSE. Yes, queenliness. When you greet him, hold your head up, move gracefully to the door . . .

[*Rose, while talking, glides toward the door, greeting an imaginary Alexander. She trips awkwardly.*]

ELLEN. I see what you mean.

ROSE. Er, yes — a man also wants his wife to be intelligent, so remember to talk about books and music.

ELLEN (*memorizing*). Talk about books and music. Yes, Aunt Rose.

ROSE. Well, I've done all I can do — it's up to you to do the rest.

ELLEN. Yes, Aunt Rose. Thank you, Aunt Rose.

ROSE (*starts through doorway, tripping as she goes*).

Ellen, I don't know whether you ever heard or not, but I had a beau myself once.

ELLEN. Really, Aunt Rose?

ROSE. Yes, yes, he was a very lovely young man. His name was — Elmer.

[*Rose sighs, then exits, taking the dust mop with her. There is the sound of someone falling, as Rose goes down the hall. Ellen winces. She looks absently about the room.*]

ELLEN (*enumerating on her fingers*). First I mother him, then I talk about books and music. (*There is a pause.*)

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Ellen suddenly jerks in astonishment. She stares toward the audience.) Elmer?

[Bessie and Delia enter hurriedly. Bessie runs to window, peers out.]

BESSIE. Ellen! There's a car stopping here. It must be your young man!

ELLEN. Good Heavens! And I haven't changed yet!

DELIA *(gathering up Ellen's garden hat and gloves)*.

Here, Ellen. Take your things with you. Rose will let him in. But hurry!

[Ellen exits at stage left. The bell rings.]

DELIA. You answer it, Rose.

[Delia exits, stage left. Rose goes out upstage door. There is the sound of voices in the hall and Rose's voice is heard saying, "Do come in." Rose enters followed by Alexander Worthfield. She trips. Alexander carries a flower box under his left arm. He shifts his hat from one hand to the other, runs his finger around the rim of his collar and looks nervously about the room.]

ROSE. Won't you sit down, Mr. er . . .

ALEXANDER. Worthfield. *(He sits down. There is a pause.)* This is splendid weather we're having. Isn't it?

ROSE. Yes. Lovely. *(They sit facing each other. They smile at each other nervously. They clear their throats.)*

So you're the young man that — uh — er . . .

ALEXANDER. Yes, that is, I, er . . .

[He swallows.]

ROSE. I see. Well, Ellen is a sweet girl. Very sweet.

ALEXANDER. She certainly is! So different from other girls. So unaffected, so natural, so thoroughly herself! You do not find that often in people.

ROSE *(apprehensively)*. Much less often than you think, in fact. *(Rose rises.)* I'll tell Ellen you're here. *(Alexander rises stiffly. Rose bumps against the end table as she moves toward the door. She picks the table up, somewhat angrily, and places it in its proper place.)*

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on the other side of the sofa.) Who put this table here, anyway?

[As soon as she exits, Bessie rushes in through the up-stage door. Without speaking or looking at Alexander, she grabs the end table, places it in its former position and rushes out. Alexander watches in amazement. Left alone in the room, he reaches into his pocket, takes out a tiny box from which he lifts an engagement ring. Picking an imaginary hand up out of the air, he thrusts the ring onto a finger.]

ALEXANDER. No, that won't do. *(He jumps at the sound of his own voice.)* No. That won't do at all. You have to do it this way. *(He rises, walks to the French windows, turns so that he speaks to the sofa.)* Ellen. Ellen, darling — there that's more like it. Ellen, I know I haven't known you for a long time, but — but I feel as if I had known you for a much longer time because — because — you're so natural and simple. No! I don't mean simple — I mean, naive. No, not naive, exactly. Gosh! I'm saying all the wrong things. I'm making it sound like I think you're the only one that is dumb enough to want to marry me. *(While Alexander talks, three little heads, Aunt Bessie, Aunt Rose and Aunt Delia, have appeared at the curtain, Alexander is much too preoccupied with his own thoughts to notice.)* Say, that might be an idea. No. No. Don't get angry. I didn't mean that. What I meant was that you're so very wonderful and I love you and want to marry you. Please! Say yes! Say yes!

BESSIE *(forgetting herself)*. Yes!

[Alexander freezes. All stare at Bessie in horror. Suddenly the three aunts disappear behind the curtain. Alexander continues staring at the spot. After a few minutes he goes back to his proposing, this time in pantomime. As he holds the ring out in front of him, it drops from his hand. He gets down on his hands and knees to retrieve it, and just has time to tuck it away when Ellen enters.]

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ELLEN (*taking it to be some of Bessie's work, she rushes to Alexander with a cry, kneels beside him*). Alex! Alex, darling! Are you all right? What happened? Are you hurt? Let me help you, you poor boy. Are you bleeding?

ALEXANDER (*pulls her down on the floor beside him, laughs, is obviously pleased with the attention, kisses her, then pushes her away so he can see her face*). Gosh, how I've missed you! Especially these last few minutes!

ELLEN (*surprised*). Alex, didn't you fall just a minute ago? I mean, didn't you trip over something?

ALEXANDER (*mussing her hair and kissing her again*). No. Should I have?

ELLEN. Yes. Oh! I mean — no — that is . . . what were you doing on the floor then?

ALEXANDER. Practicing.

ELLEN. Practicing?

ALEXANDER (*he pulls Ellen to her feet and leads her to the sofa*). I'll tell you all about that in a minute. But first I want to know what you've been doing, what you've been thinking since last week, *and* I want to look at you.

ELLEN. Why, I haven't been doing anything in particular.

ALEXANDER. Then I suggest that you kiss me now.

[*He starts to pull her into his arms, but Ellen pulls away abruptly.*]

ELLEN. I don't think that's a very dignified thing to do.

ALEXANDER (*looking worried*). It wasn't supposed to be. Ellen?

ELLEN. Yes?

ALEXANDER. Has something happened to you since last week? I mean, have you changed your mind about me?

ELLEN. Oh, no, Alex! Of course not.

ALEXANDER. Well, then. Come here for just a minute. I want to ask you something.

ELLEN. What?

ALEXANDER (*irked*). Nothing.

ALEXANDER PROPOSES

ELLEN (*walking stiffly across the room, speaking in an unusually crisp voice*). Alex . . . ?

ALEXANDER (*brightening*). Yes?

ELLEN. Have you ever read *Candide* by — uh — by Dickens?

ALEXANDER (*puzzled*). No. Is there — any reason — why I should?

ELLEN. No. Except that it's such a lovely book. Such fluency, such style . . .

ALEXANDER. Are you sure there isn't anything wrong?

ELLEN. Why, no. Why do you ask?

ALEXANDER. Well, in the first place, Dickens didn't write *Candide*. Voltaire did. And in the second place "lovely" isn't the word for either *Candide* or Dickens, no matter how you look at it. Darnit all, Ellen. What's the matter? You seem different, somehow. As if you were angry with me for some reason. I can't understand it.

ELLEN. Different? How?

ALEXANDER (*smiling*). Well, for one thing, you are lovelier than I even imagined.

ELLEN (*relieved*). Oh, Alex!

ALEXANDER. And I love you even more than I thought I did. But for a moment you seemed strange, remote. And the funny part of it is that you seemed almost lovelier than ever, like a queen, just now. Oh, Ellen. Would you . . . ? I mean, could you . . . I want you to . . .

ELLEN (*withdrawing abruptly*). Alex, do you like music?

ALEXANDER. Huh? Oh — music. Yes. That is, some music. Why?

ELLEN. Oh. I just wondered.

ALEXANDER. That's nice. That's very nice.

ELLEN. Alex? Did you start to say something a minute ago?

ALEXANDER (*bitterly*). Who? Me?

ELLEN. Of course you, silly. You had a funny note in

ALEXANDER PROPOSES

your voice just then, as if you wanted to ask me something.

ALEXANDER (*waving his hand loftily*). Oh, that! Don't mind me. My voice often sounds like that. It's still changing, you know.

ELLEN. But I thought you said in your letter you had something important you wanted to ask me.

ALEXANDER (*bitterly*). Oh, yes! But you must have misunderstood. It wasn't important at all. I just came down here to ask you if you had read *Wuthering Heights*, by — er — Shakespeare.

ELLEN (*puzzled*). No. I haven't. Why?

ALEXANDER. It's a very lovely book. (*His mood changes.*) I'm sorry, Ellen. I was going to ask you something. Come over here a minute.

[*They walk backstage to the window and look out. Alexander puts his arm around Ellen's shoulders.*]

ELLEN (*softly*). Yes, Alex . . .

[*Alexander opens his mouth to speak. Bessie creeps in carrying a large coil of rope. Alexander hears her and turns to see what is happening. Ellen tries to block his line of vision. Bessie, unaware of the commotion she is causing, ties one end of the rope to the leg of the chair in the stage right furniture group, moving the chair back so that the rope is taut. She calls to Rose in a whisper. Rose comes, trips over the rope, Bessie catches her and nods. Rose and Bessie exit.*]

ALEXANDER (*bursting*). Good night! What kind of a house is this?

ELLEN (*innocently*). What's the matter?

ALEXANDER. Nothing. But just then I thought I saw one of your aunts come in here and tie a rope from the leg of the chair over there to the leg of that chair.

[*He points.*]

ELLEN. Well, er — you did.

ALEXANDER. That's what I thought. (*There is a long pause.*) Ellen, why did she do that?

ALEXANDER PROPOSES

ELLEN. Oh, it's for — for the — mice.

ALEXANDER (*politely*). Mice?

ELLEN. Uh-huh. Mice. They're so awfully bad around here, you know.

ALEXANDER. Oh. I see. Now. What was that book you were just speaking of?

ELLEN. We have a very special kind of mice. They are too smart for traps, you know. Traps don't help at all.

ALEXANDER (*ignoring her*). You said it was written by a very clever author.

ELLEN. So we stretch ropes up like that, and they — run into the ropes — and strangle themselves.

ALEXANDER (*he grins slowly*). No. I don't believe it. Now let's go on with the books.

ELLEN (*wistfully*). You don't believe me?

ALEXANDER. No.

ELLEN. Oh. (*Ellen sees the florist's box which has dropped unnoticed to one side of the sofa.*) Oh! Are those flowers?

ALEXANDER. Oh, yes. I guess I forgot to give them to you. Here.

ELLEN (*opening them*). Why, Alex! Roses! How sweet! They're lovely! (*She calls out.*) Aunties! Come see the lovely flowers that Alex, I mean, Mr. Worthfield, has brought me.

[*The three aunts appear instantly, exclaiming "how nice," "how pretty," "lovely," etc. Rose, who enters first, trips on the rope. Bessie looks the other way. Rose moves the chair to the furniture group at stage right. The rope falls limply to the floor.*]

ROSE. Have you shown Mr. Worthfield our garden?

ELLEN. Er, no. Not yet. Why don't you show it to him while I'm putting these in some water?

[*Delia exits quietly through upstage door.*]

ROSE. Well . . .

ELLEN. I'll come along as soon as I've finished. I'll just be a minute.

ALEXANDER PROPOSES

ROSE. Well, come along, then, Mr. Worthfield.

[*Rose, Bessie and Alexander exit through the French doors. Ellen lifts the roses out of the box, reads the little card and smiles. Delia reenters, carrying a vase.*]

DELIA. Here.

ELLEN (*startled*). Oh. I thought you'd gone with the others.

DELIA. Here. Put them in this.

ELLEN. Thank you, Auntie. I was just going to get one.

DELIA. I stayed behind because I wanted to talk to you.

ELLEN (*suspiciously*). Oh-oh! I was afraid of that.

DELIA. It's about Alexander Worthfield. I want to give you some advice.

ELLEN. How do *you* think I should get Alex to propose, Aunt Delia?

DELIA (*taken in*). Oh, simple. You must be mysterious, gay and charming. And never — wait — how did you know what I was going to say?

ELLEN (*impishly*). I'm psychic. Auntie, were you ever in love?

DELIA. Why, yes, I . . .

ELLEN. Was his name Elmer?

DELIA (*surprised*). Yes-s. . . But how did you . . . ?

ELLEN (*smugly*). Psychic. But Auntie. Tell me. Who is Elmer?

DELIA. Well, his name wasn't Elmer, really. We just called him that because it was such a beautiful name. (*There is a pause.*) Oh, yes. Well — about Alexander. I guess the most important thing to remember is to never let Alexander be sure of you until he has proposed. Keep him guessing.

ELLEN. Guessing what?

DELIA. Are you being impertinent?

ELLEN. Auntie! Of course not!

DELIA. Don't sound that way, then. What you're trying to keep him guessing at the moment is, whether you will or you won't marry him.

ALEXANDER PROPOSES

ELLEN. But what if he guesses the wrong way?

DELIA (*annoyed*). Which way?

ELLEN. That I won't marry him. If I make him think I won't marry him, then maybe he won't want to ask me.

DELIA. Oh, don't worry about that. Men are too egocentric to ever think you'd really turn them down.

ELLEN. Well, then, if he knows I won't turn him down, *how* can I keep him guessing?

DELIA (*picking her words*). Just by leaving a doubt in his mind. Then he won't stop until he has you for sure.

[*There is a pause. Delia starts to exit.*]

ELLEN. Wait, Aunt Delia. Don't go. Tell me, how do you keep a man guessing?

DELIA. Oh, by teasing him, by being — well — fluffy; by goading him on and then refusing to be serious.

ELLEN (*frowning squeamishly*). Auntie, you're not suggesting that I be coy, are you?

DELIA (*delighted*). That's it! Exactly. You've got to "dally" with him.

ELLEN. Dally with him?

DELIA. Yes, dally with him. Tell him he's just your "lil' boy." (*She makes a cooing gesture.*) Well, it'll look better on you. You're younger. Don't let him get serious. If he does, tease him out of it. Make him know you don't care if he proposes or not.

ELLEN (*doubtfully*). Well — all right. I'll try, anyway. Would you mind finishing this bouquet? I told them I'd join them in the garden. I'd better go.

DELIA. No. I'll take them. Here. You run along.

[*Delia arranges the flowers, reads the card, and sighs.*]

Rose and Bessie reenter through the French doors.

ROSE. He's such a dear boy! He says the nicest things.

BESSIE. He said that I reminded him of violets, because they're always peeping so shyly around corners.

ROSE. And he said that I reminded him of buttercups because they're such a lovely color. (*She starts to sing.*)

ALEXANDER PROPOSES

"Oh, I'm called little buttercup
Sweet little buttercup . . . "

(*Bessie and Delia stare at her. Rose clears her throat noisily.*) Well, I'll get about my business.

[*Rose, followed by Bessie and Delia, exit through up-stage door. Alexander enters from French doors. He looks angry and confused. Ellen follows him in, looking meek, but determined.*]

ALEXANDER. You know, Ellen, sometimes . . .

ELLEN (*coquetishly*). Ah, now, 'ittle boy mustn't get angry or I'll pank.

ALEXANDER (*beside himself*). Oh! (*Ellen pokes him coyly in the ribs. Alexander closes his eyes. He does not move.*) If you do that just once more . . . !

ELLEN. Ah — now. (*She musses his hair and gives him another sly little poke.*) My great big Alex . . .

ALEXANDER (*savagely*). Ellen, have you been drinking?

ELLEN (*giggling*). No. I'm like this all the time.

ALEXANDER. That's all I wanted to know. Where's my hat?

ELLEN (*pulling on his arm*). Why do you think I've been drinking?

ALEXANDER. It just occurred to me as a possible explanation for your behavior. Nothing definite, you understand, just a possible explanation.

ELLEN. What do you mean, "my behavior"?

ALEXANDER (*exploding*). What do I mean? Listen! No! Where's my hat?

ELLEN. I won't give it to you until you tell me what you were going to say.

[*Alexander opens his mouth without being able to speak. He walks around the room feverishly.*]

ALEXANDER (*dangerously*). All right, I'll tell you what I came here today for. I came here to ask you one simple little question. One little question of one, two, three, four words! That was all I had to say! Four words!

ALEXANDER PROPOSES

But would you let me say them? No! I wanted to ask you to marry me. WILL YOU MARRY ME? But you wouldn't let me get it out. (*Ellen gapes.*) When I met you I thought you were the loveliest, most natural girl in the world — so sincere, I thought, so unaffected and natural. Ha! What a fool I was. At first, I thought you were just another very charming young woman. Then I found I couldn't stop thinking about you, even after you were gone. You grew upon me. You became an obsession with me. I got so I didn't enjoy any of my old — pastimes — and every time I made a plan for the future, you were somehow all mixed up in it.

ELLEN (*gasping*). Oh, Alex!

ALEXANDER. Don't interrupt! This time I'm going to say what I'm going to say! (*There is a silence.*) Where was I? Oh, yes! So I couldn't get you off my mind. I didn't know what was the matter. Then one day it dawned on me. "Why, you're in love with Ellen," I said to myself. The only thing for you to do is to marry her or you'll never have any peace. (*Pause.*) So I came here today — to ask you — to marry me. (*He snarls.*) And what happened?!

ELLEN (*joyously*). Alex! Do you really want me to . . .

ALEXANDER. Don't interrupt! Where was I? Yes! But what happened! First, you lift me up — literally; then you brush me off — intellectually; and finally disappear — mentally.

ELLEN. But, Alex. Listen to me!

ALEXANDER (*waves her aside*). At first I thought you were showing me another side of yourself. And I was prepared to try to understand it and love that side of you as much as I loved the side of you I already knew. But you turned out to be a — a — hexagon, with half a dozen sides — and you can't learn to love a hexagon — you just can't.

[*Ellen starts to talk. Alexander continues to talk.*

ALEXANDER PROPOSES

ELLEN. But Alex. I love you. I do want to marry you. I l-o-v-e-y-o-u. I want to marry you. For goodness' sake stop screaming and listen to me. I love you!

ALEXANDER. But I guess it wasn't your fault. You probably knew what I came to ask you and wanted to stop me so . . .

[*Alexander stops suddenly and Ellen's voice screams out, "I love you."*]

ALEXANDER. Wh — what did you say?

ELLEN (*quietly*). I said that I loved you.

ROSE (*entering*). She said she wanted to marry you.

ALEXANDER. Do you really mean it?

DELIA (*following Rose in*). Of course she means it.

ALEXANDER. I'm so — so — happy! I don't know what to do . . .

BESSIE (*entering*). Take her in your arms and kiss her, silly.

[*Alexander rushes to Ellen, kisses her.*]

ALEXANDER. Let's be married right away.

BESSIE. Yes, quick. Before something happens!

ELLEN (*to Alexander*). Oh, darling, anything you say.

[*Rose exits.*]

ALEXANDER. Today?

ELLEN. Today? Well . . .

ALEXANDER. Yes, darling. Right away. Now.

ELLEN. But I—I—haven't even a suitcase packed.

I'll have to get some things together.

ROSE (*enters carrying an overnight bag which she hands to Alexander*). Here. Everything she'll need is in there.

ELLEN. But—I'll have to change. I can't be married in *this* . . . I . . .

[*Delia exits and reenters with a coat, holds it out for Ellen.*]

DELIA. Put this on. You look perfectly charming, just as you are.

ALEXANDER PROPOSES

ALEXANDER. That's right, darling. Just as you are.
That's the way I'll always want you.

[*Bessie exits. The action is moving upstage, toward upstage door.*]

ELLEN. But . . . but . . .

[*Bessie reappears with a hat which she pokes on Ellen's head. Rose bangs a pillow on the sofa, and inadvertently places the chair with the rope attached to it on the other side of the room, so that the rope is pulled taut.*]

BESSIE (*looking at Ellen*). There now.

ELLEN (*close to tears*). Oh, you're so wonderful! — all of you!

[*Ellen hugs and kisses the three aunts. Alexander kisses each of them on the cheek. The aunts start to sniff. Ellen and Alexander start to exit, but at the door Alexander turns back.*]

ALEXANDER. Before we go, I want to thank you. You've all been so grand. I don't think I ever could have proposed without you.

[*Ellen and Alexander exit.*]

ROSE (*her voice cracking*). That's just what Elmer said.

DELIA (*sighing*). His very words!

[*She sniffs.*]

BESSIE. The day he proposed to Ellen's mother!

[*Ellen and Alexander poke their heads back into the room for a last goodbye. The aunts sniff, wave goodbye at the closed door and automatically move backwards as they wave. They are just backing into the tightly stretched rope, when the curtain falls.*]

The End

THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES

By

ALFRED KREYMBORG

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CAST

NARRATOR

DEMOS

LALIUS

SOCRATES

XANTHIPPE

CRITO

XENOPHON

PLATO

PHAEDO

APOLLODORUS

MELETUS

KING-ARCHON OF ATHENS

PRISON KEEPER

SCENE ONE. The Marketplace, ancient Athens.

SCENE TWO. The Trial.

SCENE THREE. A Room in the Prison.

THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES

SCENE ONE. THE MARKETPLACE

A corner of the marketplace in ancient Athens. Against a background of moving figures and subdued voices, two citizens greet each other: Lalius (the gossip), and Demos (the people).

LALIUS. Good morning, neighbor Demos.

DEMOS. Good morning, neighbor Lalius.

LALIUS. It's a beautiful day.

DEMOS. Yes, but not for me. I walk in a cloud. I go to the trial of Socrates.

LALIUS. But so do I, and I feel no cloud.

DEMOS. You do not love him, Lalius, and so the sun shines.

LALIUS. Were you one of Socrates' students?

DEMOS. No, just an every-day man he stops in the streets. He buttonholes everybody and asks questions no one can answer.

LALIUS. And you loved him for that?

DEMOS. No, for his manner. It's wonderfully warm and full of laughter.

LALIUS. Did he laugh at you?

DEMOS. No, at himself. He said he asked these questions because I looked wise, and he couldn't answer them.

LALIUS. Were they dangerous?

DEMOS. No, quite harmless. And they bring such a harmless fellow to trial.

LALIUS. But suppose he's acquitted?

DEMOS. The charges are too great against him, and the persons against him. They say he's a corrupter of youth and a betrayer of the gods.

LALIUS. Grave charges, Demos, and true from all I've heard.

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DEMOS. You listen to the gossips, Lalius.

LALIUS. And you to your affection. What knowledge have you if this wise man has none?

DEMOS. The knowledge of his love and that's enough. And how can love corrupt youth?

LALIUS. How old is Socrates now?

DEMOS. Seventy. And a fine time to bring a good man to trial! But he must be used to trials by now. And he'll crack a joke if they sentence him. I remember he told us once, "It is best for a man not to be born at all, and next best to die as soon as possible."

LALIUS. And you call that philosophy? How can such a fool be a teacher?

DEMOS. Through his heavenly character. His belief in free thought. The right to question everything, even the gods.

LALIUS. Isn't that sacrilege?

DEMOS. No. For he has a soul that must have come from the gods and was given the right to question his equals and superiors. Nor is anything inferior to Socrates. He brings down the heights and raises the earth to his level — humble and sweet, and patient as the whole of time. And I know he'll be patient today, even with his enemies.

LALIUS. Hold, Demos, look over there at the meat market! Isn't that stout man Socrates?

DEMOS. Yes.

LALIUS. And that scrawny woman his wife, Xanthippe?

DEMOS. Yes, the old shrew. Just look at her wring her hands and wag her tongue!

LALIUS. He must have learned his patience there.

DEMOS. Yes, no doubt. Let us draw closer . . .

XANTHIPPE. But I ask you, you old fool, why I should order beef on a day like this?

SOCRATES. Because one day is like another.

XANTHIPPE. But suppose you're condemned to death?

SOCRATES. Our children will need you more than ever.

THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES

And the food as well. They can go on without me, but not without food.

XANTHIPPE. Even on such a day you have to prattle. And to think how I'll be disgraced, and your children's children!

SOCRATES. You were well-born, Xanthippe.

XANTHIPPE. Don't remind me. Or remind me of the dowry I brought you; or how you never earned an obol with all your teaching.

SOCRATES. I've always refused all fees.

XANTHIPPE. And is that how you save your family? Or even your self-respect?

[Beginning to weep.]

SOCRATES. Will somebody kindly take this woman away?

A WOMAN. How do you stand such a shrew, sir?

SOCRATES. Because she's the mother of my children.

XANTHIPPE. Socrates, Socrates . . .

SOCRATES. Quiet, Xanthippe. See that the children grow strong.

[Xanthippe, still weeping, is led away.]

DEMOS. Good morning, Socrates.

SOCRATES. Ah, good morning, Demos. It's good to see you today.

DEMOS. But not to see *you*, sir.

SOCRATES. Nonsense, my friend. I go to my people and the court of justice. And what they decide will decide me . . .

VOICE. Ho, Socrates!

TWO OTHERS. Master! Master!

[Pause.]

SOCRATES. And what do I behold here? Three of my students with long faces? You, Crito? You, Xenophon? And even you, Plato?

XENOPHON. We go to your trial, Socrates.

PLATO. No, to the trial of Athens.

SOCRATES. Well spoken, Plato. But I wouldn't be too hard on the people. They're ignorant.

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CRITO. But you've shown them the light.

SOCRATES (*drily*). Apparently not, good Crito. Or not enough light. Perhaps they'll see that, after I'm gone.

XENOPHON. How can you speak so serenely?

SOCRATES. Because, Xenophon, my conscience is clear.

XENOPHON. But suppose they condemn you unjustly?

SOCRATES. And what does Man know about justice?

PLATO. But if *his* is the final decision?

SOCRATES. Then, good Plato, we'll go our separate ways.
And the judges to their own condemnation.

CRITO (*eagerly*). But master, if you're sentenced, I'll bail you out. I'm rich and I'll talk to the jailers.

SOCRATES. No, Crito. Your wealth has often aided me, but not in this fashion.

TRIO. Socrates!

SOCRATES. And let us hear their sentence first before we anticipate time. Or eternity.

XENOPHON. That dreadful word!

CRITO. And how cheerfully he says it!

SOCRATES. Why not, my friends? Does my head have to hang like yours?

PLATO. Not mine, sir.

SOCRATES. Plato, you were ever my favorite student.
How old are you now?

PLATO. Thirty.

SOCRATES. And you came to me . . . ?

PLATO. Ten years ago at twenty.

SOCRATES. And what have you learned in that time?
What, are you silent? Was it so little?

PLATO. Too much for my expression.

SOCRATES. You'll have leisure for that when "the gadfly's" gone.

PLATO. Ah, sir, I shall start a school, an academy — in your name, your name forever!

SOCRATES. You flatter me, lad. And you, Xenophon?

XENOPHON. I'm writing a history of these evil times — with only one good name — yours.

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SOCRATES. I hope the people will read it. And you, Crito?

CRITO. I'll talk to the jailers . . .

SOCRATES. And if you're condemned for bribery?

CRITO. I'll go the way you go.

SOCRATES. But suppose I escape my body?

CRITO. Then my soul will follow yours.

XENOPHON. So will mine.

PLATO. And mine!

SOCRATES. Good, my young friends. But what have we here? See all the people gathering! It's like the old Olympian games.

XENOPHON. Or the gathering of a storm.

SOCRATES. Quiet, Xenophon. Here's the assembly. And let people lose their heads, I shall never lose mine.

[*Cheers and groans from the crowd. Black out marketplace; spotlight assembly, of which we behold only the principal characters: the King-Archon; the edge of the five hundred citizens chosen by popular vote as the jury; Meletus, the leading accuser of Socrates; and Socrates, Plato, Crito, and Xenophon. In the background, at the edge of crowd of citizens, Demos and Lalius.*]

SCENE TWO. THE TRIAL

ARCHON (*reading from a scroll and stopping for a moment*). Meletus, the accusations brought forward by yourself and others have now been read.

MELETUS. Thank you, Archon. But you haven't read the charge.

ARCHON. Socrates, stand forward! Are you ready for the charge?

SOCRATES. I'm always ready.

ARCHON. Listen carefully then. (*Reading.*) "Socrates is a public offender in that he does not recognize the gods that the state recognizes, but introduces new beings or

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demons. He has also offended by corrupting the youth. The penalty incurred is death." Have you heard the charge?

SOCRATES. Even to the last word.

ARCHON. And what have you to say in your defence?

SOCRATES. First of all, men of Athens, let me say that I don't come with speeches finely tricked out nor carefully arranged. I use the same words you've heard me use in the marketplace. This is the first time I've come before the court, although I'm seventy. I'm therefore an utter foreigner to the manner of speech here.

MELETUS. Why don't you go back where you came from?

SOCRATES. I'm an Athenian, Meletus, and believe in the gods and customs of the state, equally with you. But I'm not a conservative, and for those people who don't relish free speech I say the gods gave me that freedom.

LALUS. Speak on, Busybody, let's hear the gods!

SOCRATES. The gods, my friend, have never interrupted me, and it's you, not I, who are sacrilegious, for what I've said through my long years has come from an inner voice.

DEMOS. Then why have you asked so many questions?

SOCRATES. Because, Demos, it was once said by the oracle of Delphi that Socrates was the wisest man. (*General laughter.*) I'm glad you laugh at this, for there's nothing I love more than laughter. But I said to myself when I heard the oracle: "What in the world does the god mean, and what riddle is this? For I'm conscious I am not wise, either much or little. Can he be lying? — no, for that is impossible for him." But I was puzzled and sought the solution in men wiser than myself.

MELETUS. Did you hope to refute the god?

SOCRATES. No, myself. But in all men I questioned — many of you among them — I found the same answer. They thought they were wise, but were not. And I often thought to myself, "I'm wiser than this man, for he thinks he knows something when he doesn't, whereas I, as I don't know anything, don't think I do, either." (*Ripples of*

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applause.) Thank you, gentlemen, but I don't ask your applause, but merely your final judgment.

ARCHON. Proceed, Socrates.

SOCRATES. Thank you, Archon. From one man I went to another, with the same result, and those who had the most reputation seemed the most deficient, while those of less repute were sensible, at least. But all were alike in considering what they did the only profession and wisdom.

ARCHON. What did you do?

SOCRATES. I had to return to myself and say, like the oracle, "That one of you, O human beings, is wisest, who, like Socrates, recognizes that he's of no account in respect to wisdom." (*Pause.*) Well, men of Athens, now you know why so many men have learned to hate me. And have brought me here.

MELETUS. But you corrupted my son!

[*Sensational murmurs.*]

SOCRATES. Meletus, you're violent and unrestrained.

MELETUS. But you don't believe in the gods.

SOCRATES. You must be joking, my friend. What is this voice I hear but a spirit? And aren't the spirits gods? Can I corrupt your son when an oracle speaks?

MELETUS. You have weaned him away from me.

SOCRATES. Is that all? Don't you wish him to think for himself and grow?

MELETUS. Yes, but the kind of growth he had from you will end in your death.

SOCRATES. Ah, there speaks your prejudice! This has condemned many other good men; and there's no danger it will stop with me. Someone might ask me now: "Aren't you ashamed, Socrates, of having followed a pursuit for which you'll be put to death?"

MELETUS. What is your answer, you who never answer?

SOCRATES. Meletus, this isn't my first trial with death. You forget that I served as a soldier in the Athenian army, at Potidaea, at Amphipolis, at Delium.

XENOPHON. Yes, and he saved the life of Alcibiades!

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SOCRATES. Quiet, Xenophon, leave that to history. What the god gives a man to do is always an order. And whether his station in life is a soldier's or a philosopher's, he doesn't desert his post through fear of death or anything else. I'm ready for your verdict, men of Athens.

CRITO. How he smiles on the world . . .

XENOPHON. As though it were his!

PLATO. It will be in time!

CRITO. Yes, Plato . . .

OTHERS. It will be!

[Voices fade out in a blackout. As the lights rise again, all eyes turn toward the door through which the jurors file in. Growing suspense among all but the man on trial.]

DEMOS. The gods defend him — these faces say nothing.

LALIU. They're good enough for this trial.

ARCHON. Silence, citizens, or I'll clear the gallery!

[He turns toward the leading juror, who hands the Archon a paper. The judge reads gravely, pauses, and then . . .]

ARCHON. Are you ready for the verdict, Socrates?

SOCRATES. Yes, Archon.

ARCHON. By a majority of thirty votes you have been adjudged guilty.

SOCRATES (*quietly*). That is better than I expected. Nor am I grieved, men of Athens, at your condemnation, since it doesn't surprise me. No, don't hang your heads, those of you who voted for me — or those who voted against. You don't injure me so much as yourselves.

ARCHON. But Socrates, while the death penalty has been proposed, you have the right to suggest an alternative.

SOCRATES. That's good of you, Archon and gentlemen. And what do I deserve to suffer or pay, because in my life I neglected what most men care for — money-making and property, military offices, public speaking, and the various plots and parties that come up in the state? I refrained from all those things that would have been of no use to you or myself. For I tried to persuade each

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of you to care for his own perfection in goodness and wisdom.

MANY VOICES. Socrates!

SOCRATES. What penalty shall I propose instead of death? Imprisonment? And why should I live in prison a slave to those in authority?

VOICES. No — no!

SOCRATES. Quiet, my friends. Or shall I propose a fine, with imprisonment until it's paid?

VOICES. Yes — yes.

SOCRATES. No, gentlemen. For I have no money to pay with.

CRITO. I have, Socrates.

SOCRATES. Quiet, Crito. Shall I propose exile instead? Perhaps you'd accept that. I must be possessed of a great love of life if I thought that you, my fellow citizens, who couldn't endure my conversations, could expect other towns to endure them. (*Laughter.*) And a fine life I'd lead at my age wandering from city to city and always being driven out!

DEMOS. Socrates, can't you go away from us quietly, without talking?

SOCRATES. No, Demos. And this is the hardest thing to make even you believe. If I say that if I kept quiet I'll disobey the god, you'll say I'm jesting. And if I say that to talk every day about virtue is the greatest good to man, you'll believe me still less.

ARCHON. Then what is your proposal?

SOCRATES. Archon, I propose an acceptance of death, with the penalty postponed long enough for my friends to have some final words with me. They grieve on my account, and I must talk that grief away.

ARCHON. Your friends are young and tender . . .

SOCRATES. Yes, and generous. Crito, Plato and others who have offered thirty minas of silver to stay my punishment.

CRITO. And we act as his surety.

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SOCRATES. Quiet, Xenophon, leave that to history. What the god gives a man to do is always an order. And whether his station in life is a soldier's or a philosopher's, he doesn't desert his post through fear of death or anything else. I'm ready for your verdict, men of Athens.

CRITO. How he smiles on the world . . .

XENOPHON. As though it were his!

PLATO. It will be in time!

CRITO. Yes, Plato . . .

OTHERS. It will be!

[Voices fade out in a blackout. As the lights rise again, all eyes turn toward the door through which the jurors file in. Growing suspense among all but the man on trial.]

DEMOS. The gods defend him — these faces say nothing.

LALIU. They're good enough for this trial.

ARCHON. Silence, citizens, or I'll clear the gallery!

[He turns toward the leading juror, who hands the Archon a paper. The judge reads gravely, pauses, and then . . .]

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CRITO. And we act as his surety.

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OTHERS. We do, we do!

ARCHON. And I accept that surety in the name of the city of Athens. Have you anything else to say?

SOCRATES. Yes. I didn't think that I ought, on account of my danger, to do anything unworthy of a free man. I much prefer to die after such a defence than to live under any other defence. And gentlemen, it isn't hard to escape death; it's much harder to escape wickedness, for that runs faster than death. (*Sound of distant thunder.*) And now I wish to prophesy to all who have condemned me!

CROWD. Socrates!

SOCRATES. The time just before death is the time when most men prophesy. And so I say that punishment will come upon you straightway after my death, far more terrible than the punishment dealt out to me. And now I take my leave to talk with those who stood for my acquittal. Let the authorities prepare the rest.

ARCHON. We shall do that, Socrates, quietly.

SOCRATES. Thank you, Archon. And I'm conscious that the inner voice that has always guided my thinking hasn't stopped me from talking even now. Those who think of death as an evil must be mistaken. If I were going to something evil, the voice would have stopped me.

VOICES. Go on, Socrates.

SOCRATES. No — now the time has come to go away. I go to die and you to live; but which of us goes to the better lot, is known to none but God.

[*Thunder continues. Blackout. Almost as lights rise again, we hear Xanthippe's voice.*]

SCENE THREE. A ROOM IN THE PRISON

XANTHIPPE. But Socrates, I refuse to leave; I shall die beside you!

SOCRATES. And what will become of the children?

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XANTHIPPE. They'll live on the state that stole you from them.

SOCRATES. Paupers, my dear?

XANTHIPPE. Then let the state remove its sentence.

SOCRATES. No.

XANTHIPPE. Or ask it to pardon you.

SOCRATES. No, Xanthippe, I'm not a beggar. They've spoken their word, and I mine.

XANTHIPPE. Words, always words. I've done all I could for you. I've scrimped and saved. I've been a dutiful wife, a dutiful mother. And yet on this dreadful day you give me more words.

SOCRATES. And you give me more weeping. Is there no one to take this woman away?

KEEPER. Socrates . . .

SOCRATES. Ah, who is this, my keeper?

XANTHIPPE. Go away, monster!

SOCRATES. Xanthippe . . .

XANTHIPPE. He's the man who'll give you the hemlock.

SOCRATES. That's his duty.

XANTHIPPE. Take him away; he looks like death.

SOCRATES. No, for he's weeping, too.

KEEPER. I cannot do this thing; I cannot.

SOCRATES. Do you have to do it now?

KEEPER. In an hour, sir.

SOCRATES. Then compose yourself, my friend, and be good enough to see my wife to the door.

XANTHIPPE. Is this your last word?

SOCRATES. Take care of the children. And let them live as I have.

XANTHIPPE. No — no.

SOCRATES. Don't strangle me, dear. And some day if the gods permit . . .

XANTHIPPE. No — no — no.

[She is evidently led away, the "no"s growing lower, more distant.]

VOICE. Socrates, I've hurried as fast as I could . . .

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SOCRATES. Yes? What is it, Crito?

CRITO. You seem disturbed.

SOCRATES (*sighing*). Let there be no other women today.
Nor womanish voices.

CRITO. Poor Xanthippe. I'll unite you again. I've talked to my friends in the prison.

SOCRATES (*laughing*). And crossed their palms again?

CRITO. I cannot help it — we cannot lose you.

SOCRATES. You'd undermine the state for me?

CRITO. Yes, even the state.

SOCRATES. Then all I've said to you and the others is meaningless? You've left me each day greatly cheered, only to return with your dark face and conspiracy?

CRITO. Yes, Socrates.

SOCRATES. No, Crito, that isn't worthy of you, still less of me.

CRITO. But if you die, I'll never have such another friend. What is money to me if it cannot save you? Or my life or any life whatever?

SOCRATES. Crito, I fear I must send you away.

CRITO. No.

SOCRATES. This is no longer a question of life or death, but of right or wrong. Would you have me do wrong?

CRITO. Yes, against those who wronged you. I can take you elsewhere. In Thessaly, they're ready for you; they'll embrace you to the last man.

SOCRATES. But I'm a son of Athens, and though I'm the last man here, I still believe in her and die in her.

CRITO. And she'd let you die — that's what Athens has come to! And you who fought for her, fought for the democracy, saw it go under, fought against Sparta, saw the land torn apart, fought against the Thirty Tyrants, fought against the death of our civilization — you accept *her* condemnation!

SOCRATES. I've accepted my fate, good Crito. And I cannot requite one wrong with another. We have no

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right to do evil to anyone, regardless of what he may have done to us. Isn't that so?

CRITO. I'm afraid so.

SOCRATES. What else do you fear? Have I not a soul? And suppose I have not? The state of death is one of two things: either it is nothingness, where the dead isn't conscious of anything, or a migration of the soul from this to another place. If it's unconsciousness, like a sleep in which the sleeper doesn't even dream, death would be a wonderful gain. If on the other hand, death is a change from here to some place where all the dead are, what greater blessing could there be? What wouldn't you give to meet the great heroes of the past, and listen to the singers and poets, from Orpheus to Homer? I'm willing to die many times if these things are true.

CRITO. So would I.

SOCRATES. And think of conversing with men who lost their lives through an unjust judgment, and comparing my lot with theirs!

CRITO. Then you admit the injustice?

SOCRATES. Certainly. But *you'll* have to admit that the folk up there don't kill people for it.

CRITO. Master, you're incorrigible. I can see you going from man to man, and even from god to god, asking questions. You'll always be a gadfly.

SOCRATES. And you laugh at this?

CRITO. I can't help it.

SOCRATES. Neither can I. And now it seems we'll have to help these others. Here they come with their long faces, though not so long as yesterday's!

PLATO. This is our last visit, Socrates.

SOCRATES. Be seated, gentlemen; there is still time to talk. And I'm in a mood to talk you to death.

XENOPHON. Would it were mine!

SOCRATES. Nay, Xenophon, we need historians. And how are you, Phaedo?

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PHAEDO. Fairly well. And almost as happy as you are, master.

SOCRATES. And you, Apollodorus?

APOLLODORUS. All pain has left me.

SOCRATES. Good, then we're perfect companions. And speaking of pleasure and pain, I was thinking last night, after my fetter was removed so I could sleep, what a strange thing pleasure is, related to pain. Both never come to a man at the same time and yet, if he pursues the one and captures it, he has to take the other also. It's as if they were at war and God wished to reconcile them, and when he couldn't, fastened their heads together. That's how it felt when the fetter came off.

PHAEDO. You have a kind jailer.

SOCRATES. Why do you say that, Phaedo?

PHAEDO. He has never obstructed our passage.

APOLLODORUS. And I found him weeping outside.

SOCRATES. I had to send him away for that.

CRITO. But Socrates . . .

SOCRATES. No, Crito, we don't take advantage of goodness here. And if the man cannot give me the hemlock, I'll take it myself.

PHAEDO. That would be suicide.

SOCRATES. No, I'd carry out my new friend's duty for him. And I'd only make myself ridiculous if I clung to my life and spared it, when there's no more profit in it.

APOLLODORUS. Ah, I see the fellow.

SOCRATES. Has he brought the cup?

KEEPER. No, sir.

SOCRATES. Isn't it time?

KEEPER. Yes, sir.

SOCRATES. Come, my good man, do you see me sorrowing?

KEEPER. No, sir.

SOCRATES. Or these young men sorrowing?

KEEPER. No, sir.

SOCRATES. Aren't they closer to me than you are?

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KEEPER. No, sir, I am now.

SOCRATES. A perfect response! Now why do you still stand there?

KEEPER. I thought to postpone a little . . .

SOCRATES. Go, my good friend, I command you. So do the gods.

[Footsteps of jailer. Long pause, during which the students pace up and down.]

PHAEDO. Socrates . . .

OTHERS. Socrates . . .

ALL. Master!

SOCRATES. What do I hear, my friends? Do you wish to weaken me? And where is that fellow?

PLATO. Shall I go after him?

SOCRATES. Yes, Plato, you're the strongest now.

PHAEDO. Ah, but here he comes.

APOLLODORUS. Like a wretched shadow.

CRITO. I wish I were anywhere else on earth.

SOCRATES. Silence, Crito. Well, my friend, have you the cup?

KEEPER. Yes, sir.

SOCRATES. It seems rather small for so much. Come closer, don't be afraid. Now tell me, I need some final instruction and you know about these things. What must I do?

KEEPER. Nothing, sir, except drink the poison and then . . .

SOCRATES. And then?

KEEPER. Walk about till your legs feel heavy. Then lie down . . .

SOCRATES. Yes?

KEEPER. And the poison will take effect of itself.

SOCRATES. Nature is kind to Man.

[Low murmurs.]

CRITO. See how calm he is.

PHAEDO. And how gentle.

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APOLLODORUS. He doesn't even tremble or change expression.

ALL. Ah, the cup, the cup!

SOCRATES. Quiet, my friends. And now, my good man, what do you say about pouring a libation to some deity? May I or not?

KEEPER. Socrates, we prepare only as much poison as we think is enough.

SOCRATES. Ah, quite perfect and I understand. But I must pray to the gods for good fortune. So I offer this prayer and may it be granted.

XENOPHON (*excitedly*). See how he raises the cup to his lips!

PLATO. And how cheerfully he drains it!

CRITO. Socrates . . .

ALL. Socrates!

[*General weeping.*]

SOCRATES. What conduct is this, you strange men? I sent the women away for this very reason. Keep quiet and be brave.

[*Whispered excitement.*]

PHAEDO. Look at him now!

APOLLODORUS. He's moving around.

PLATO. As the keeper advised!

KEEPER. How are you, sir?

SOCRATES. Keeper, my legs feel heavy.

KEEPER. Then lie on your back. (*Pause.*) May I feel your feet and legs?

SOCRATES. Yes.

KEEPER. Do you feel anything in this foot?

SOCRATES. No.

KEEPER. In this thigh?

SOCRATES. No.

KEEPER. What is it, sir? Do you wish to speak?

SOCRATES. Is Crito here?

CRITO. Yes, master.

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SOCRATES. Crito, we owe a rooster to Aesculapius.
it and don't neglect it.

CRITO. That shall be done. But have you nothing else
to say? (*Longer pause.*) Oh, Plato, come here.

PLATO. What is it, Crito?

CRITO (*solemnly*). The cold has reached his heart.

OTHERS. Ah!

PLATO. Shut the eyes and mouth.

CRITO. I cannot, Plato!

PLATO (*quietly*). Then I'll do it. (*Pause.*) Such is the
end of our friend, the best and wisest and most upright
man of our time. And a man the world will never forget.

[*Thunder dies down. Slow curtain.*]



